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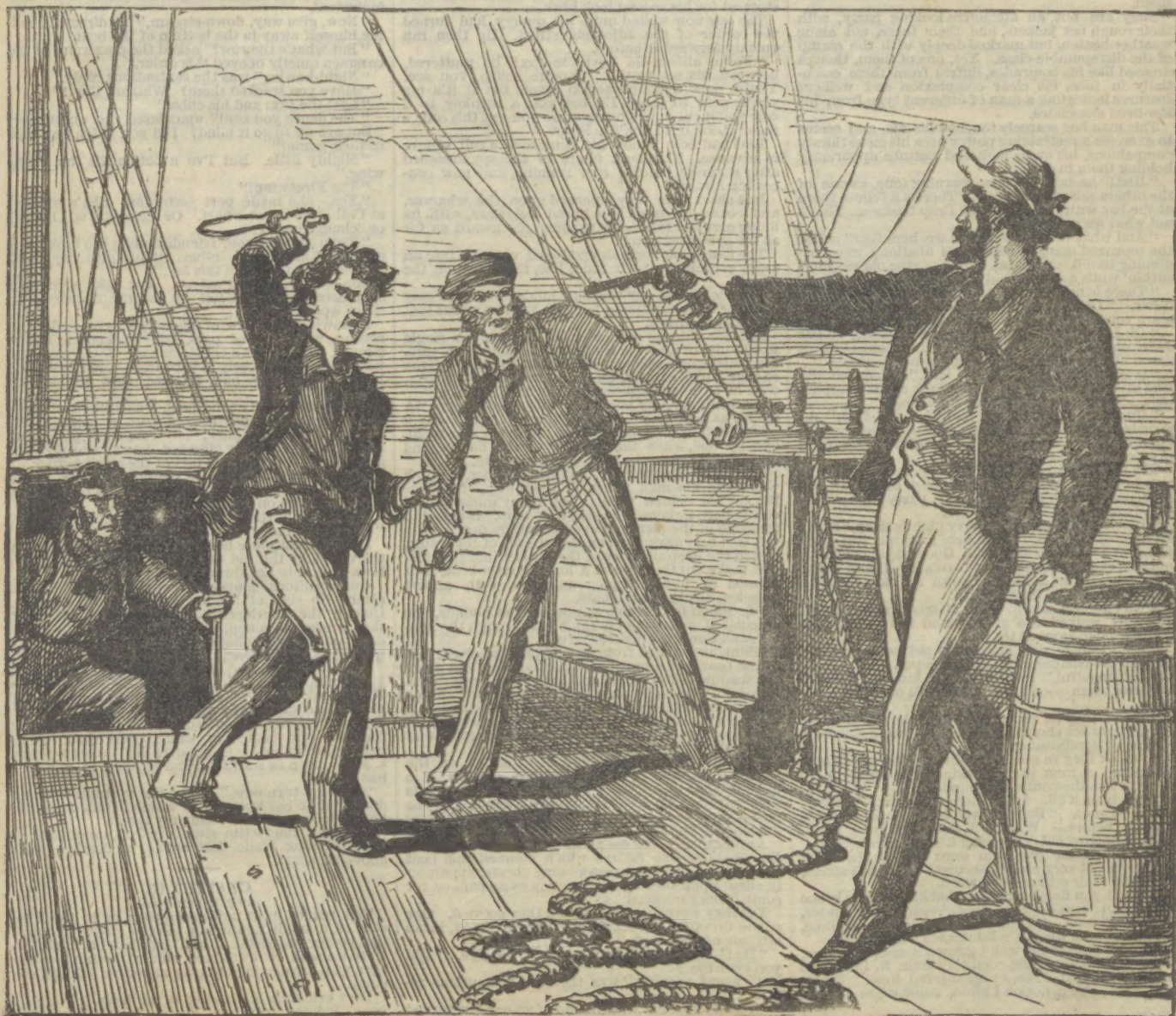
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No. 157.

Mike Merry, The Harbor Police Boy; or, The Night-Hawks of Philadelphia.

BY CHARLES MORRIS,

AUTHOR OF "WILL SOMERS," "PHIL HARDY," "PICAYUNE PETE," "DETECTIVE DICK," "HANDSOME HARRY," ETC., ETC.



IMMEDIATELY IN HIS FRONT CAME THE BOY MIKE, BRANDISHING HIS IRON CLUB, AND GIVING VENT TO A HALLO OF DELIGHT IN THE PROSPECT OF CAPTURING OLD LEVI THE FOX.

Mike Merry, THE HARBOR POLICE BOY;

OR,
The Night-Hawks of Philadelphia.

BY CHARLES MORRIS,
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CHAPTER I. A MIDNIGHT CRUISE.

NIGHT had long since fallen over the streets and homes of the Quaker city. Midnight was approaching with rapid tread, and the brooding wings of slumber were drooping lower and lower, to lull into rest all the eyes and brains of the late busy community.

But in the well-lighted central parts of the city many persons were yet abroad. The theaters had but lately poured out their thousands of auditors into the streets; while late revelers wandered, like unquiet birds of the night, seeking refuge in drinking or in gambling saloons, or mourning, in mournful tones, over their last penny "gone to the dogs."

And there was life and wakefulness in far different quarters of the town. But we cannot undertake to trace these night-hawks in all their varying forms, and prefer to devote our attention to a single party of them, with whom alone we have any immediate business.

In the bar-room of a low-fronted tavern on Beach street, in the district of Kensington, are seated five men, closely grouped around a table in a corner of the apartment. Other customers are occasionally coming and going in the tap-room, but these five have been seated there for the last two hours, with glasses of foaming ale frequently renewed before them.

They are not an attractive-looking party, with their rough net jackets, and their faces, not alone weather-beaten, but marked deeply with the stamp of the disreputable class. Yet, one of them, though dressed like his comrades, differs from them essentially in face, his clear complexion and well-cut features indicating a man of different type from his low-lived associates.

This man has scarcely touched his ale, and seems to exercise a restraining power over his more thirsty companions, his every look and gesture apparently holding them in control.

"Hist!" he said, in a low, warning tone, as one of the others raised his voice. "There's a fellow there at the bar with his ears open. Drop business. That's not what we are here for."

"And what the blue blazes is we here for?" asked the reprobated man, on whom his libations were beginning to tell. "Not as a mug of ripe old ale ain't suthin' wuth a chap's while; but—"

"There is not a bit in the case," interrupted the other. "Drink your ale in quiet, and thank your stars you are not put on a penance of cold water."

"Oh Lud, that's good!" laughed another. "Put Jake on cold water, eh? Why his bones'd turn green afore a month, like so much moldy cheese."

"It is getting near bedtime, lads," remarked the first speaker, casting a peculiar look at his companions. "We must be tracking up town."

"Guess we mought set 'em up ag'in, fust," responded Jake, in a grumbling tone. "Here you are, landlord. Fetch us a taste of suthin' good for a dry throat, my hearty."

The barkeeper cut short the conversation which he was holding with a roughly-dressed customer, and hastened to furnish the thirsty party with a new supply of the favorite beverage.

"Here's a bumper to a merry night's sleep," spoke another of the five. "And here's a hope it'll carry pleasant dreams on its track. Good old ale ought to untwist the wrinkles in any man's heart, and make him as happy as a king. Drown all care then in a bumper, and let's be off, lads."

With cheerful assent their glasses were drained, and they walked in a group from the room, after settling their score at the bar.

"Ain't they terrible anxious to get home early?" queried the customer of the barkeeper.

"Jist dreadful," responded the latter. "But if bed sees them soon I'm considerable off my reckoning."

"Think they're on a lay?" and he pointed his thumb over his shoulder, while his face assumed a curiously significant expression.

"I think they're good customers to my ale barrel. That's all a man in my business is called on to think," was the cautious rejoinder.

"Oh, blast it all. I ain't here on a pump," replied the customer. "But I haven't seen one of them fellows before—What'll I take, did you say?"

Well, a drop of old rye, seeing it's landlord's treat."

Meanwhile the five men were making their way along the not very clean pavement of Beach street, directing their course southward.

"Won't you flats ever learn that killing time is one thing, and business is another?" asked their leader, in a vexed tone. "Your tongue is too loose, Jake. And it's worse when it's lubricated with ale."

"And if fat old ale won't grease a chap's tongue, what the thunder's the good o' drinkin' it, I'd like to know?" queried Jake, in an injured tone. "Howsomdover, I've a notion I ailers know when ter pull up."

If you have your way you'll pull up ag'in a rope yet," rejoined another. "And with nothin' to dance on stouter nor air."

"Hist!" came again from thin lips of the leader. Giving the others a sign to move on he drew silently within a deep doorway, and remained there glancing keenly around its edge until his comrades were nearly a square distant.

"It must have been a false alarm," he muttered, as he at length stepped from his place of shelter, and gazed intently up the deeply-shadowed street, with its few lights dimly dispelling the darkness.

"I could have sworn I heard a cautious step just behind us," he continued, "but it's plain enough that the coast's clear."

He walked away as if fully satisfied. He had not got far, however, before he halted and turned sharply around, searching the street behind him with keen glances.

"All rosy," he muttered, turning a corner, and hurrying at a rapid pace down a side street.

Yet it was not so rosy as he fancied. Sharply cautious as he had been, there was another personage quite as sharp as himself.

When they left the tavern and proceeded down the street, a dwarfish form, which had stood leaning in a weary aspect against the shadowing trunk of a neighboring tree, suddenly straightened itself, and turned into the street in their rear.

This figure moved along in the gloom of the houses, at a short distance behind them. Coming near a gas lamp, however, it halted a moment, in the dark mouth of an alley, making a slight involuntary noise in doing so, which attracted the watchful attention of the leader of the party in advance.

The sharp eyes of the spy did not fail to advise him of the ambush of this leader, and he remained in his retreat, until the latter had again started onward.

And now the movements of the spy were peculiar. Leaving his place of refuge he ran forward with a quick, light step, until he had reached the doorway formerly occupied by the man in advance.

Into the opening the diminutive form squeezed itself, while his eyes gazed cautiously out. He was just in time, too, for at the same instant the man stopped for his second look back.

The spy now waited until his quarry had turned the corner of the adjoining street. He then ran quickly forward as before.

"Forge ahead, old Levi, the fox!" he muttered, between his set teeth. "You're sharp, you are. You're just a double-action razor; but if it's me you're goin' to shave, I'll bet you a monkey to a cow you'll cut your fingers afore you cut this coon's face. Look out I don't hole you."

Levi had now joined his comrades, a full square in advance. The small figure of the spy hastened after them as before; now running, and now concealing himself.

In a short time they emerged upon the wharves, and looked out upon the broad Delaware, with its living array of tall masts running southward as far as the eye could reach.

The five men here stopped and entered into an eager conference, their tones low, their eyes on the alert.

Yet the unseen spy was now hidden within twenty paces of them, straining to catch the low words that fell from their lips.

But for this he was too far distant. A single word only, of all their conference, reached his ears. Yet this word seemed significant to him, by the change which came upon his face when Jake spoke, with incautious loudness, the word "Fleetwing."

"All sublime, my horses," muttered the spy. "A wink's as good as a nod, to a blind mule, any day."

He continued to watch them, until he saw them, one by one, leave the shadow of the houses, and cross the street to the long wharf opposite.

This was well covered with piles of lumber, through which the five men threaded their way. Nor was the spy far behind them. Not many minutes had elapsed ere he heard the sound of oars. Stealing to the edge of the pier he looked heedfully over.

It was very dark here, on the surface of the water, and in the deep shadows of the lumber, but he could just make out the form of a long, narrow boat, as it seemed to him, creeping outward, with almost noiseless strokes of the oars.

"So much for the foxes; now for the hounds," he ejaculated, as he quickly ran back through the lumber, and down the deserted street.

Midnight sounded from a neighboring clock, just as the boat of the party in question stole out from the shadow of the wharf, and turned its prow downstream. The night was densely overcast. Not a star beam broke through the canopy of clouds. A thick gloom seemed to creep along the surface of the water, rendering all objects invisible except at a very short distance.

Yet this was not the only boat afloat on the shadowy surface of the stream. A quarter of a mile further down the river lay a long barge, its oars resting idly in the rowlocks, except that one pair moved just sufficiently to overcome the drifting influence of the tide.

As nearly as could be made out in the darkness the phantom-like figures which manned this boat numbered seven—stairwart-looking ghosts, apparently afloat upon the midnight waters as a penance for some former misdeed.

Yet they were more alive than they seemed. One of the drooping heads suddenly uplifted itself, in an attitude of attention.

"Hal!" came in a low tone from the lips. "Did you hear that?"

"I heard nothing," was the equally cautious reply.

"I could swear it was the dip of an oar," returned the first speaker. "Keep quiet. Let us hear if it sounds ag'in."

Deep rest fell upon the floating crew. Every ear

was intent to catch a repetition of the suspicious sound. But nothing but the low wash of the waters could be heard, as the tide swept past their prow.

"There it is again!" at length exclaimed the first speaker.

"No," returned the coxswain. "That's only a swash against the wharves."

"I hardly think so," was the dubious reply. "Ship your oars there. Let her drift with the tide. I'll bet there are night-hawks abroad."

He had hardly spoken when the sound of a faint whistle met their ears. It came from the direction of the wharves, and was four times repeated.

They all stirred on hearing this sound, and remained silent and intent. After a minute it sounded again, four faint but clear notes.

"I'll wager it is the boy's signal," said the first speaker. "Answer it, Flynn."

In response to this order one of the men whistled three notes, in a low but clear tone.

Again came the call from the wharves; this time twice repeated.

"Head her ashore," ordered the spokesman of the party. "Somewhere about Race street wharf, I should judge. It's Mike's pipe, that's plain."

The oars were cautiously handled, so as to avoid noise, and the boat headed inward toward the long, dark line of the piers, which were rendered dimly visible by the row of gas lights on the street fronting them.

One or two repetitions of the signal guided the boat to a pier just north of Race street, where, as they got close in, the outlines of a diminutive figure were visible, perched upon the outer wharf-log.

"Here, my hearties," he cautiously hailed. "Head her in so as I can jump aboard."

"What's up, Mike?"

"Fun," he answered. "There! That's the ticket! Look out for your underpinning, Pat Flynn, for I'm a-comin'."

And with an agile leap he sprang from the wharf to the boat, his heel just grazing the shin of the man he had warned, and eliciting a low growl from that individual.

"Now, give way, down-stream," he directed, coiling himself away in the bottom of the boat.

"But what's the row?" asked the coxswain, as the oarsmen quietly obeyed this order.

"Night-hawks," was the sententious reply. "Have you tracked them? Who are they?"

"Levi the fox; and his cubs."

"The deuce you say!" ejaculated the questioner. "But are we to go blind? Did you catch any sign of their game?"

"Mighty little. But I've a notion it's the Fleetwing."

"The Fleetwing!"

"Yes. She made port yesterday. She's moored at Catharine street wharf. Or leastways so I heered on 'change to-day."

"From some of your friends among the brokers, I suppose," laughed the other. "But, give way, lads; we will have to search this lay."

The boy remained silent. But his shrugging shoulders told that he felt the shadow of distrust in these words.

Meanwhile the crew of the other boat had been rowing with muffled oars, rapidly shooting downstream. They kept a considerable distance from the wharf line, and closely skirted the shore of Smith's Island, after they had reached that well-known locality.

Finally the head of the boat was turned sharply shoreward. She shot inward with a quick flight, toward where the dark, low range of piers, the raking lines of thickly crowded masts, and the dim glimmer of street lamps, told of the city's border.

"Easy! Easy!" came in cautioning tones, as the prow of the boat grazed the timbers of a tall barque, which lay side on to the pier.

"Hold her at that," hissed the voice of the leader. "Wait till I come."

In a moment more he had scaled the lofty sides of the vessel, by the aid of a grapnel rope which had been flung into her shrouds.

One cautious glance over the deck. It was clear. No sign of life marked its broad expanse. Quickly the interloper darted across it, with feet that made no sound, and disappeared down the companionway leading to the cabin; its doors opening readily to his touch.

In one of the state rooms adjoining this cabin slept a handsome, thickly-bearded man, his face, through all the relaxation of slumber, showing evidence of great force and energy of purpose.

Yet all his vigor promised to avail him little now, for over him bent that white, cruel face, full of unextinguishable hate, and over his breast hovered a knife, keen as a stiletto, and clasped in a merciless hand.

"It is my turn now," hissed the murderous intruder. "If he but knew what awaited him he would hardly have ventured within my reach."

And still the victim slumbered on, unmindful of the glistening blade that shone in deadly gleam above his head.

CHAPTER II. SUPPER FOR TWO.

The reader must now accompany us to the interior of a small house, in a narrow street, in one of the poorer districts of the city of Philadelphia. Here we wish to introduce him to certain personages who are destined to play an active part in our story.

They evidently are classed in the long roll of the poor, judging from the locality in which we find them, and the meager and well-worn furniture of their abode. Yet in bearing, tone and manner they seem to hold strong affinity with the polished and

cultured classes, despite their poverty-stricken surroundings.

The household consists of two ladies. One of these is a well-preserved, plump little woman of thirty-five, or thereabouts. Hers is one of those round, pretty faces, which seem made for the display of merriment, and to whom the shadow of care, which rests upon this face, appears an unnatural adjunct. Not that she can keep back a smile that seems native to her lips, but it is evident enough that her life is not a happy one.

Her companion is a girl of some seventeen. A tall, willowy figure, and a face whose features are almost perfect, mark one destined to ripen into the richest womanly beauty. And with delicacy of feature she has all the beauty of color. A rich, warm complexion—amber-tinted with rose—crimson lips in fine contrast with the polished ivory of her teeth, and dark-brown, glistening hair which droops in heavy braids over her forehead, complete the details of a beauty to which no mere description can do justice.

Yet, strongly as she differs in general appearance from the elder lady, there is an intangible resemblance between them; something not to be described, yet hinting at a near relationship.

"Not much for supper to-night, Kate," said the elder lady, as she pointed to the thinly-spread table.

"Nothing but good appetites and a clear conscience."

"And bread and butter," laughed the girl. "For my part, I think it is a generous spread, for we don't always have the butter."

"Well, I hope you will enjoy it. I suppose we ought to be thankful, if we consider how many there are to-night with but an empty table before them. And yet, somehow, I can never satisfy my appetite with that stale reflection."

"Because, dear mamma," replied the girl, throwing her arms lovingly around her companion, "because you have not been accustomed to poverty and privation; because you have been used to affluence, and it is no light matter for you to be reduced to want. As for me—"

"It is I who think of, child."

"As for me," continued Kate, "I am young and strong. I am used to living on a scant allowance. I beg, dear mamma, that you will not worry concerning me. I have no time to be unhappy."

And the beautiful girl kissed her mother with a warmth of affection which showed how intimately their two souls were linked in the bonds of love.

"Well, we have tea; that's one comfort," said the mother, as she seated herself, and poured out the steaming beverage.

"So all comfort has not left us," rejoined Kate, with affected merriment. "I will take sugar in mine, mamma, not much. I don't like much sugar, and I can't bear milk."

"It is remarkable how strangely your tastes agree with the state of our larder," and the mother laughed in spite of herself, as she handed Kate the steaming cup.

"If you would only use that private fund, my dear mother," remarked Kate, with a concealed feeling of discontent, "which I fear you are too conscientious about, we might have—"

"I hope you will not speak of it, Kate," was the firm response. "My mind is quite made up on that point. You know how shamefully I have been treated. Thank Heaven, I retain some pride yet. It is enough to be abused, without tamely submitting to insult."

There were tears in her eyes as she spoke. Kate remained silent. Yet she could not keep a look from her face which showed that she did not agree with her mother on this mooted point.

"It don't matter, at any rate," rejoined the girl, her beautiful face lighting up with a quick revulsion of feeling. "I have been promised better work to-day. We will have milk in our tea then. And we will live as happily as two birds on a bough. What was that, mamma? Is somebody at the door?"

"I think so," rejoined the mother, as she rose and passed through the short entry to the front door.

Kate listened, with youthful curiosity, eager to discover who was there. She heard a familiar voice accosting her mother.

"It's only me, Mrs. Northcote. Thought I'd drop in an' help you git rid o' your supper. 'Cos I were too far from our princely mansion to streak home in time for the supper-bell."

"Come in, come in, Mike," cried Mrs. Northcote, hospitably. "We can give you a crust and a welcome, and that is better than a feast with a grudge."

"I ain't a bit partikler," responded the youthful voice. "My folks never spoiled me with too high livin'; so I ain't proud or sassy."

A smile came upon Kate's face as she listened. "It is something besides his supper has brought the boy here," she thought, her eyes full of interest.

The lad who entered the room with Mrs. Northcote was an ordinary-looking boy. He was of a short, stout, square-built figure, with evidence of greater strength than his stature and age appeared to demand. His face was dark in complexion, and bore an unusual expression of energy and resolution.

A broad, firm chin, close-set lips, and keen eyes, gave indications of much force of character. Yet underlying this general expression were visible an independence, and a ready sense of humor, which changed and softened the otherwise too rigid lines of his young face.

In dress he was not a very presentable person for any high-toned society, being ragged and careless, while his attire seemed made for somebody two sizes larger than himself. But he wore it with an ease, and a graceful unconsciousness, which hindered any show of awkwardness in the set of his garb.

"Yes, I don't care if I do partake," he remarked,

seating himself at the table. "Bread and butter, ma'am, if you please. I never eat nothing for supper but bread and butter."

"That is not so, Mike," laughed Kate. "You ate bread without butter the last time you were here."

"Oh yes!" he quickly responded. "That was one of my fast days."

"Won't you have tea, Mike?"

"Well, yes, half a cup, being's you speak of it."

Kate was sitting at one side, regarding the boy with a look that was half anxiety and half amusement.

"Oh, now that I think of it," exclaimed Mike, half choking himself with a huge mouthful of bread and butter. "I've got somethin' hefty in my pocket I'd best unload."

As he spoke he pulled out a paper parcel, of no great size, and deposited it upon the table, munching away at his bread while doing so.

"What is it?" asked Mrs. Northcote, a frown upon her face.

"Nothin' for you, ma'am. It's for my darlin' Katy here. And I know she won't go back on it."

"But, Mike," demurred Kate, with flushed cheeks and trembling voice, "who sent this package? Is he—is the—but you know what I mean. Why do you not tell us?"

"This package?" asked Mike, as if in surprise. "Oh, that was given me by a sea-gold chap this afternoon. I was taking a stroll along the wharves, you see; and run across a vessel just in port. It was the—now what was that queer name?"

"The Fleetwing, maybe," suggested Kate, with a cunning smile.

"Well, if you ain't the premium guesser," cried Mike, with a show of marveling wonder. "You have hit on that there lofty bark the very first trial, and not half tried."

Mrs. Northcote, who had stood quiet but deeply disturbed during these few words, now suddenly exclaimed:

"Take it back, sir! I refuse to receive anything from him! Take it back, and tell George Claxton that I—that Emily Northcote—will starve rather than be dependent upon his bounty. Tell him that, though he may, I cannot forget the past."

"Yes, ma'am," responded Mike, still unconcernedly munching away.

"You shall take all! I have touched nothing of his former gifts! You shall take them all!"

"Mamma," interrupted Kate, in a warning aside, "do be calm. It is unwise to reveal all of our business to this boy. Can we trust him? Will he not—"

"Yes, yes, Kate. I had forgotten myself in my indignation. We will let the matter stand as it is—but I shall receive no more gifts at his hand."

"But this is to me," rejoined Kate. "Was not that what you said?" appealing to the boy.

"Just to a hair's breadth," rising and pushing aside his empty plate. "I dunno what it is, 'cos Cap Claxton wasn't perfit enough to explain. But I s'pose it's some little keepsake; like a couple of Indian shawls, or a set of diamonds, or some sitch trifle that he's picked up in furin parts. Howsom-dever, I guess I'll be cavortin' now. I've had my supper, and that's half what I come for. Good-by, folks. I'll drop round for them things some other time, when business ain't so pressing."

With an airy wave of his hand, the queer boy made his way to the door, leaving his entertainers divided between merriment and surprise.

"Well, if he is not an odd one!" exclaimed Kate. "And what an amazing appetite the little rogue has. I fear we will have to make our suppers on a cup of tea."

"I have no desire even for that," responded the mother, gloomily. "Oh! that he would cease tormenting me with his unwelcome gifts! If he but knew how I felt toward him!"

"I wish he did," said Kate, to herself, with a sly look at her mother. "But this gift is to me, mamma, and you don't know how anxious I am to find out what it is. Mayn't I just take a peep—one little peep?"

"Oh! I don't care, you tease."

In fact, if the truth were known, she was not quite free from curiosity herself as to the contents of the package. She stood leaning on the back of a chair, her foot tapping the floor, and her eyes turned away in affected indifference.

Yet as Kate purposely fumbled at the fastenings of the package, and delayed in opening, the cunning girl was aware of a growing impatience on the part of her mother. This feeling broke out at last in a quick exclamation:

"Are you going to be all night about that, child? And our tea growing cold."

"But it is tied so tight—so ridiculously tight," returned Kate, bending over it so as to conceal a smile which she could not keep from her face. "This knot is enough to pull my finger nails off."

"Why don't you cut it then?" and Mrs. Northcote, stepped quickly forward, no longer able to repress her curiosity, as to the contents of the mysterious package.

But we must leave them for the present, and return to the cabin of the Fleetwing, where we have seen the unconscious sleeper under the glittering knife of a seeming assassin.

Thrusting the needle-like point of the blade through the paper, he drove it deep into the wood of a table which stood by the bedside, where the eyes of the sleeper could not fail to see it upon awakening.

"That is my first oracle of revenge," he said to himself.

The same instant he gave a quick start of surprise, for there was a sharp rap outside, as if something had struck the side of the vessel.

The sound of voices followed, in stern accents. Instantly the intruder darted into the cabin. As he did so, however, he turned and looked again through the state-room door.

It was no longer the form of a sleeper he saw there. The recumbent man was lifted upon one elbow, his eyes questioningly fixed upon the fugitive.

"Aha!" he cried. "Levi Rostrou! So, you are the demon I dreamed of!"

CHAPTER III.

A NAVAL COMBAT.

INDEED there was promise of lively times outside the barque. The sound heard by Levi Rostrou had been made by the sharp contact of a boat against her sloping sides. This was the craft containing the boy, Mike Merry, and his companions, which had been somewhat distanced in the chase.

"Here they are!" cried Mike, springing to his feet. "The rascally river-pirates! Go for them, my hearties! Give 'em a touch of Ballynoogin."

The preceding boat still lay by the side of the vessel, kept partly off by an oar. Mike's exclamation was followed by the hasty descent of two of her crew from the deck of the barque.

The men grasped their oars, as she floated clear from the vessel's side. At the same instant one of them gave vent to a sharp whistle, which rung through the whole surrounding space.

"On them, lads!" yelled the coxswain of the police boat. "To your oars! Run down the bloody pirate! Make her spin!"

These orders were given in expectation of the others seeking safety in flight. But such was evidently not their intention.

On the contrary they sprung to their feet, grasping their oars as weapons, and ready to bring them down with terrible effect on the heads of their unwary pursuers.

Mike was the first to perceive this threatening peril.

"Back water!" he yelled. "Starn all! The hounds will brain you! Go for 'em, lads! Go for 'em! It's nip and tuck between the pair o' ye."

His warning cry was followed by an immediate arrest of the movement of the boat, just as her prow lapped the stern of that of the river thieves. The next instant they were all on their feet, armed like their opponents, and a fierce battle had commenced between the hostile crews.

"Thunderation!" screamed Mike, as his quick eyes glanced along the line of combatants. "Levi the fox ain't aboard! He's on the vessel yet, and that's what the pirates is waitin' for. There's somethin' wuss than plunder a-keepin' him, and I'm goin' to find out what's up."

With an agile leap he gripped a dangling rope, that hung over the vessel's side. Hand over hand he went up it, with the quickness of a monkey.

"Drop that rooster with a bullet!" yelled one of the pirate crew.

But Mike rolled over the bulwarks of the Fleetwing to her deck, as a spiteful report was followed by a leaden ball, which grazed the spot where he had just been.

"A miss is as good as a mile, any day," he cried back, his shaggy head peering over the side.

The fight, by this time, was changing in character. The quick rattle of oar-blades against each other, varied by an occasional duller sound, as some unlucky head felt the weight of one of these dangerous weapons, was too fierce and exhausting a mode of warfare to be long continued.

One after another of the fighters dropped the oar, and grasped the more dangerous weapons with which they were armed, and the sharp crack of pistol-shots began to succeed the dull sound of oar-strokes.

Already several of the fighters in each boat were placed *hors-de-combat*. Such a fierce fight could not continue without some one becoming the worse for wear, and it was evident that the superior numbers in the police-boat would give them the victory.

Only two of the pirates, in fact, remained unharmed. These now suddenly turned to their oars, and in a moment had their keen-prowed boat moving through the water; leaving their partly disabled comrades to keep up the fight.

But their assailants had fared even worse. Of the seven only three remained in condition to use the oars; while of the other four one or two were stretched insensible in the bottom of the boat.

The hand-to-hand conflict was now changed to a chase, both parties vigorously plying their oars, while those who were past rowing amused themselves by popping at each other with their pistols.

This exercise, however, was a sheer waste of powder and lead. The boats were moving too unsteadily for any sure aim to be taken, nor were the men in any condition for steady shooting.

"Drop that fun!" cried the coxswain of the police-boat. "It's doing no good, and is only a bother to us. The hounds are gaining water on us, as it is."

This was evident enough. The heavily-built police-boat was no match in speed for the sharp-prowed craft in advance, which slowly widened the distance between them.

While this fight and flight were in progress, Mike

Merry was otherwise occupied on board the Fleetwing.

A single glance around the deck told him that it was unoccupied. The companionway had been thoughtlessly left open on account of the warmth of the summer night, the care of the deck being given to one of the sailors.

But a night-watch on deck at sea, and a night-watch in harbor, are under very different circumstances. With but a step from bulwark to wharf-log, and but a deck's length from wharf-log to grog-shop, it was trusting too much to the weakness of human nature to depend on the most steady Jack Tar in such a case.

The watchman had but stepped across the street to wet his whistle at a well-known ale-house on the opposite side. But his whistle was a wide and deep one, and took some time to become thoroughly wet. And meanwhile the vessel under his charge was being seriously imperiled.

Mike, taking in the state of affairs with his habitual quickness, hastened to the companionway. Before descending, however, he took a preliminary glimpse down the open hatch.

All this, which has occupied some time in the telling, was scarce a minute in the doing. Not a minute had elapsed from the time that the warning whistle rung from the pirate boat, to that in which the alert lad had gained this point of view.

His cautious glance was rewarded by the sight of a form running quickly through the cabin, and dashing up the stairs to the deck with fierce haste.

A quick thought came to the boy's mind. He stood at the side of the opening, and it was an easy matter to extend his foot, and trip the flying villain.

Rostrou, in his blind haste, struck this unlooked-for obstruction, and pitched headlong forward on the deck, a fierce curse coming from his lips as he did so.

His curse was echoed by a taunting laugh. Quickly scrambling to his feet he caught sight of the boy, who was dancing with delight, and giving vent to screams of laughter.

"Satan take you for a meddling little ape!" yelled the furious villain, darting toward his mocking foe.

But it was no child's play to overtake Mike Merry in a race. In and out ran the boy, around masts, over cordage, across hatches, laughing and taunting still, with mocking cries of derision.

"Can't fricassee me, old Levi, till I'm basted first," cried Mike, catching at a ratline, and quickly running up the main shroud.

"Come up here, and we'll crack a hickory-nut together, like two squirrels on a limb. Come ahead, old Levi, and let's see how a fox and a monkey get on aloft."

A deep oath broke from the lips of the baffled villain. But he had other work in hand besides that of chasing an impudent boy. During this pursuit the sounds of conflict had come to his ears, unheeded in his rage. Now pistol-shots succeeded the duller ear-strokes.

He left the boy with a parting curse, and quickly crossed the deck to the opposite side, with intent to regain his boat.

Too late—both boats had left the vessel's side, and were rapidly darting away, in flight and pursuit.

"Elast their hurry! why couldn't they fight it out a minute longer?" he ejaculated. "I must take the wharf for it—and I know I've got no time to waste."

He certainly had not; for, on turning, his eyes encountered several disquieting figures.

One of these was that of the captain of the Fleetwing emerging from the cabin. A second was that of the missing watchman, who had just regained the deck. A third was that of Mike Merry, who had descended from the shrouds, and grasped a short iron bar as a weapon of defense.

Captain Claxton had just caught sight of his foe, whose sharp glances were running over every point of the situation.

"Down with him!" cried the captain, rushing forward. "Don't let the villain escape, on your lives!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE CONTENTS OF THE PACKAGE.

"I don't wish to cut it, mamma," said Kate Claxton, as she fumbled over the fastenings of her package. "This is such a nice piece of string, and it will come so handy to tie up some of my bundles of work.—There, I have got that knot open."

And the beautiful face of the girl was turned away to hide a roguish look that came upon it. She evidently enjoyed her mother's ill-concealed impatience.

"One might think a piece of string was of great importance," replied the mother. "Not that it matters much. I am sure I can have no interest in the contents of the package."

"Of course not. I know that," responded Kate, with a covert smile. "It is lucky it is addressed to me, or you would not open it at all. Now I confess to being curious. There, that's it. You can turn your head away now, mamma; for I've got it open, and I know you don't want to see what's in it."

"You're the same little tease as ever, Kate," exclaimed her mother, running toward her and clasping her round the waist. "You've made such an outrageous mystery of it, that I must admit a little curiosity. Now let us see what is in it, my dear."

"Oh, certainly, mamma, as long as you are so anxious," and Kate's laughing lips were pressed in a kiss on the round cheek so near her. "I wonder if it's an India shawl, as Mike said."

The folds of paper were opened out, and their contents revealed upon the table. They did contain a shawl, but not one of so costly a nature. It was, instead, a light lace wrap, suitable only for summer wear, and in better keeping with the plain dress of

the girl than any costly article of apparel would have been.

"Oh, mamma, isn't it pretty, exquisite, charming!" exclaimed Kate, flinging it open with a quick movement, and throwing it over her rounded shoulders. "Just the thing for these summer evenings."

"You are too impulsive, Kate. Look what you have done."

In fact she had unfolded the shawl so suddenly as to toss from it a small, leather-bound book which it contained, and which fell on the other side of the room.

"I hope there's no harm done," cried the pleased girl, darting like a bird after this object.

It proved to be a small blank book, containing a single entry on its first page.

"What is it, Kate?" asked her mother.

"Here is a letter for you," responded the girl, avoiding a direct reply. "And one for me, too. It was hardly necessary to send this book to contain two letters. Here is yours, mamma."

Mrs. Northcote hesitated a moment before taking the letter offered her. A look of pride and disdain came upon her face. But a softer expression followed this, and she held out her hand for the missive.

Kate quickly glanced over her epistle, a look of musing meaning playing upon her face. Doubt was followed by a quick resolution. She hastily crowded the book and letter into her pocket, looking shyly toward her mother as she did so.

"It will never do to let her know this. I must play the cunning hypocrite with her," thought Kate, looking at the deeply absorbed face of her mother.

The eyes of the latter slowly filled with tears as she read. Yet they did not seem altogether tears of grief. A flush mounted slowly to her cheeks. The letter dropped from before her gaze as her hand fell nervelessly into her lap.

Kate's eyes watched the quick flow of expression which passed over her mother's speaking face.

"What is it, mamma?" asked the wondering girl, as her white arm slid around her mother's shoulders.

"Good news, I hope. Oh! if my father only—"

"No, no!" cried the mother, suddenly rising, and crushing the letter fiercely in her hand. "He shall not deceive me thus. What if we are reduced to poverty, my darling? At least it is an honest poverty. I cannot forgive and forget so easily."

The tears were now flowing from her eyes. She hastened to the door of the room, leaving Kate lost in surprise.

"It is not a question of want, mamma," exclaimed the affectionate girl. "We can live, I hope. With my new work, and better wages—"

Her mother had left the room, not heeding what she said.

"If she but knew"—continued Kate, drawing the book from her pocket. "I must conceal this from her, or she would never let me keep it. I cannot think that I am doing wrong to use it. But with her peculiar ideas I dare not let mamma see it."

And Kate thrust it again into her pocket.

But we must return to the barque Fleetwing, and to the situation of affairs on and about that newly-arrived vessel.

We left the boat of the river pirates darting swiftly away, under the impulse of her single pair of available oars. The police boat followed, better manned. But the latter was more heavily laden, and not so well built for speed; and it was soon evident that the distance between the two boats was slowly widening.

"By Jupiter, she is creeping away from us!" exclaimed the coxswain of the pursuing boat. "Is there no way to put on some more steam? Can any of you fellows handle an oar?"

"Not me," replied one. "I have a bullet-hole through my right hand."

"And the devils nearly broke my arm with an oar-stroke," exclaimed a second, as a groan of pain came from his lips.

"How are you fixed, Flynn?"

"They knocked me clean out of time," replied Flynn. "But I'm getting my wits back. Guess I might fling an oar again."

He struggled to his feet, and seated himself amidships.

"We'll see if there's any backbone left in Pat Flynn," he cried, as his bladed oar cut the waves.

It was apparent that he had not lost his strength and skill. The boat felt the effect of this reinforcement, and quickly darted onward under their long, rapid strokes.

Yet the light craft in advance still continued to gain upon them. Her rowers were vigorous and skillful, and she shot onward with marvelous speed, rounding the heads of the piers, and darting like a low-flying bird down the dark stream.

The gloom of the night was rapidly shutting them out from their pursuers.

"By Jove, we'll lose them yet!" came in angry tones from the coxswain. "Drop your oars, you thieving villains, or we'll give you a volley!"

"Fire and be hung!" was yelled back in taunting accents.

This challenge was instantly accepted. The pursuing boat lost speed as her entire crew sprang to their feet. The same moment a fierce rattle of pistol-shots rung upon the air, and a storm of bullets swept over and by the escaping craft.

But the volley was too hastily given, and the distance too great in that dense shadow.

A roar of satiric laughter came back to their ears, mingled with the echoes of their ineffective shots.

Before they could seize their oars, and gain headway on their boat again, the flying skiff had vanished in the darkness, only the rattle of oars in the rowlocks telling of its existence.

On board the Fleetwing, at the same moment, events of some interest were occurring. In our last chapter we left Levi Rostrou backed up against the bulwarks of the vessel, glaring from side to side, as he saw himself partly inclosed in a net-work of assailants.

The sudden appearance of Captain Claxton on the companionway stairs is not to be wondered at. For, as we have already seen, he had wakened and recognized his assailant, just as the latter was leaving the cabin. Fully awake in an instant the captain sprang from his cot, and would have immediately pursued, but that his quick eye caught sight of the dagger-like knife quivering in the table beside him.

Hastily possessing himself of this, he discovered the missive through which it was thrust, and which was evidently intended for his perusal.

In a minute more he had turned up the light of a lamp that hung in the center of the cabin.

An intense curiosity overcame his desire to pursue the flying villain, until he had made himself acquainted with the contents of this mysterious document.

Quickly opening it, he held it to the lamp-light, reading it almost at a glance.

The unfolded paper, indeed, held but few words, but they were significant and alarming enough to the eyes that now perused them.

They ran as follows:

"GEORGE CLAXTON:

"You think, no doubt, that the walls of a prison still inclose your enemy, and save you from his revenge. This will serve to prove that you are mistaken. Tonight my blade has quivered above your heart. One thrust, and death would have been upon you. But death is not revenge. I suffer you to live that I may torture you further. Day and night peril shall environ you. At no moment shall you be in safety. Only when I have fully revenged myself, shall I deal the fatal thrust, and end your miserable life."

"YOUR DEADLY FOE."

"Out upon such child's play!" exclaimed the captain, in a tone of scorn, as he thrust the threatening missive into his pocket. "Does Levi Rostrou think to frighten a man like me with such a threat as that? Let him look out that my turn comes not first."

As he spoke he darted toward the cabin stairs, giving vent to the cry we have already recorded, on seeing his foe almost within his grasp.

"Go for him, my hearties!" roared Mike Merry, rushing forward with the weapon he had seized. "He's been a-chasin' me as if he was a 'coon and I was a partridge. Let's show him that we know somethin' 'bout rastlin'."

From three quarters his foes were advancing upon him. Rostrou stood for another moment glaring from side to side. From the cabin Captain Claxton was quickly advancing. The returned watchman hurried forward from the bow of the barque, eager, by a display of zeal, to hide his late misdeemeanor.

Immediately in his front came the boy Mike, brandishing his iron club, and giving vent to a halo of delight in the prospect of capturing old Levi the fox.

But, the latter was not so readily to be cornered. He had, so far, stood motionless, his eyes alone active.

Now, with a quick start into activity, he drew a pistol from his pocket, and fired at point-blank range at the boy, who was not ten paces distant from him.

Rapid as his aim had been it seemed effective. Mike fell with a heavy thud to the deck, a yell escaping his lips as if wrung from him by intense pain.

Leaping over his prostrate body the villain made for the wharf.

His two remaining pursuers were now but a few paces distant, and the chase became intensely exciting.

But Rostrou had the advantage of a direct line across the deck, while the others had to run at an angle. It is not strange, then, that in his cat-like flight he reached the vessel's side in advance of his pursuers.

Captain Claxton was immediately behind him as he made a quick spring to the wharf-log. Despairing of capturing him his pursuer struck a hasty blow with the razor-like knife which had been thrust through the threatening missive, and which he still grasped.

The keen blade failed to reach the body of the fugitive, but it struck the flying skirt of his coat. The knife, however, would probably have had little effect upon this, only that it was grasped at the same instant by the other pursuer.

Drawn taut in this manner the sharp blade sheared it off as neatly as though it had been cut by a tailor's scissors.

Rostrou ran on, unaware that he had left his skirt in the hands of his foes.

"Heavens! if I only had a pistol now, to wing that flying buzzard!" cried the captain. "I am afraid he has done for the boy—but there is no use in our chasing him."

"We have something here, anyhow, that may be better than the fellow himself," exclaimed the sailor, holding up a long, folded document, which he had just extracted from the pocket of Rostrou's coat, said pocket being a portion of the cut skirt.

CHAPTER V.

THE CAT AND THE MOUSE.

It was now more than an hour past midnight, and the streets of the southern district of Philadelphia appeared deserted. At long intervals, it is true, a policeman came into view, wandering along with an absent air, as if anxious to convince people

that he had no business abroad, and soon disappearing, swallowed up in some other portion of the great city.

Occasionally, too, some homeless wretch would skulk along, avoiding the lamps, as if ashamed to let the light shine upon his misery, seeking perhaps for some retired nook, in which he might sleep beyond the vision of the guardians of the night.

One form alone was visible which seemed to have a more definite object than that of killing time. This figure moved with a rapid step, following the dim length of Water street, but turning into Shippen street, when that classic locality was reached.

Pausing and looking heedfully back at every corner, and moving in a walk that was almost a run, it seemed evident that he dreaded pursuit. Yet confidence came to him as he failed to discover any trace of a pursuer, and he walked on less cautiously.

"They are off the track, sure enough," he said. "But it was a narrow strait to pull through. I hope I winged that infernal boy. It is not the first time he has been in my way."

Levi Rostrou, for he was the speaker, was not so safe from pursuit as he fancied. There were feet upon his trail that would follow him with the pertinacity of the sleuth-hound.

To learn who this pursuer was it will be necessary to go back a step or two in our story.

We left Captain Claxton and the ship's watchman disconcerted by the successful flight of their foe, from whom, however, they had captured what might prove to be an important document.

There was no use to follow the fugitive. Neither of them was armed, and their sea-legs were ill-adapted to a foot-race upon dry land.

"I am afraid he has done for the boy," remarked the captain, turning with a serious aspect to where Mike lay stretched upon the deck.

What was his surprise to see the seeming corpse spring to his feet like an India-rubber ball, as if he had received a sudden galvanic shock.

"What! that rantankerous galoot!" cried Mike, in a tone of scorn. "Him salivate me? I guess not. Tain't in his creaky boots to do it."

"But are you not hurt? What made you fall?"

"What fool wouldn't tumble when he see'd a pistol-bullet a-coming?" asked Mike, satirically. "S'pose I were goin' to stand up and be bored? I ain't that sort of rooster, not me! I'm allers on the dodge when a feller's on the shoot. Why ain't you after the fox?"

"There was no use," responded the captain. "He would outrun us."

"That comes of goin' to sea," said the boy disdainfully. "A feller spies himself for a spurt on dry land, I wonder if you watched which way he run."

"He turned into Water street," rejoined the sailor.

"Up or down?"

"Up," was the reply, and the sailor indicated the direction with his hand.

"All serene. I'm after him, like a cat after a sparrow. If he flings me I'll sell my boots."

He was not unlike a cat, indeed, in the quick spring he gave from the deck to the wharf, and his rapid flight in the track of the escaping villain.

He passed a policeman, who had heard the firing, and was hastening to the scene, as usual after the trouble was all over. This guardian of the night would have stopped the flying boy, but Mike darted like an arrow under his arms, yelling out:

"I'm on bizness, Croppy. Don't you be meddlin'. Jist ask Captain Claxton there if I ain't his lightnin' express."

While the policeman stood in momentary irresolution, Mike plunged forward into the darkness of the night, and was soon lost to view.

"Up Water street," he muttered. "He's got the start; but if he goes fur up that stately avenue I'll overhaul him sure as shootin'."

Quite unaware of this rapid pursuit, Levi Rostrou continued on up Shippen street, no longer watchful, as he was fully satisfied that he had distanced all his foes.

For two or three squares he continued to follow this street. He then turned into some smaller, alley-like avenues, and at length emerged into a wider, but short street. Here he paused in front of a respectable looking house, which stood apart from the other houses in the street.

He appeared irresolute, standing for several minutes, as if in expectation of some one coming. "They cannot be long now," he soliloquized. "There is no doubt they out-owed that clumsy police boat. I suppose I may as well leave the door on the latch, for they must turn up soon."

He opened the door with his key and entered the house. He had hardly done so ere there emerged into view, around a neighboring corner, the diminutive form of Mike Merry.

"Tracked the fox to his hole, if I hain't you kin shoot me!" cried Mike, with a burst of laughter.

"Had a notion I could pink him if he went fur on a straight street, and so I did, at the corner of Water and Shippen. And so he's goin' to leave the door open fur his cronies? That's nuts fur this chicken. If I don't investigate that there mansion then there ain't sich a thing as a musketeer in the Jersey swamps! A feller oughtn't to gab so loud when he's talkin' his bizness out o' doors; fur if some folks has tongues, other folks has ears. And that's me. Here goes."

One would have thought that Mike was a resident of the house in question, by the bold manner with which he walked to the door, opened it, and drew it carefully to behind him.

The house was well—in some parts even luxuriously—furnished. The room in which Levi Rostrou sat, impatiently awaiting the return of his confederates,

was a long, rather narrow apartment, with a handsome Brussels carpet on the floor, well-chosen pictures on the walls, and a table, with a top of Tennessee marble, occupying its center. On this table and papers were negligently scattered. At the end of the room opposite the door was a small, well-filled bookcase, and between it and the wall the partly-opened door of a deep closet.

"Hang it, I hope there has no harm come to them!" he growled, rising, and uneasily pacing the floor. "There was a good deal of shooting going on. The poor devils may have been hurt. I know there is no craft on the river could catch them if they were sound."

Seating himself, and picking up a paper, he tried to interest himself in its contents. But he flung it impatiently down after a minute.

"That's not the sort of news I want," he muttered. "If I only had the latest advices from the river! Ha! what's that? There is some sound from the street."

In his eagerness he could not rest quiet, but left the room, and hastened down toward the street door.

But the apartment was not left long without an occupant. Hardly had he stepped from it ere the door was pushed silently open, and Mike Merry cautiously entered, his keen glance rapidly taking in the details of the room.

"By Jiminy, but the fox lives high in his hole," ejaculated Mike. "Why, he's a reg'lar nabob 'mong the foxes. He slashes into books, he does; and goes fur papers and sich. What've we got here? 'The Pub-like Ledger,' 'The Daylie Try-bune.' Them's good readin'. 'The Star Jur-nal.' Well, he's got taste, he has! Guess the old fox is as fond of good stories as he is of good game. That Star Journal's jist cute."

And Mike smacked his lips as if he had tasted a very savory morsel.

"Hallo!" he now ejaculated. "By the hokey, they're a-comin', the whole ginaivy of them. It would be blazin' tough if I was pinned. Wonder where that door leads to?"

He hurried across the room and opened the door at its extremity.

"Jiminy! It's only a closet!" he continued, in a low tone. "Anyhow, it's too late now to take another deal, for they're half up the stairs. I've got to make myself scarce, so here goes."

In a moment he had plunged into the deep closet, and drawn the door partly to after him.

And none too soon. For the next instant the door of the room was thrown wide open, and several men entered, loudly talking together.

"You haven't got no ghosts round here, Cap, have you?" asked one.

"Not that I ever saw. Why?"

"I'd a notion I heard somebody talking, that was all."

"It must have been the echo of our own voices, then, for there's not another soul in the house."

"Well, here we is, safe as trivets," spoke the voice of Jake, not quite recovered from his tipsiness. "It were a rushin' narrar old squeak, you bet. It's a wonder we weren't all salted. Here's Long Tom and Tony Drake, both nipped with bullets. If me or Phil had been bored they'd nabbed the hull cur-moodgin of us. Had to row like sin, as it was."

"Get those two men to bed, Jake. Have you looked at their wunds?"

"Yes, and tied them up. It's only a bit of blood-letting. They'll be all right in a jiffy."

The spy in the closet heard a momentary confusion, as Jake left the room in pursuance of this order.

Only the man called Phil remained, in company with Levi Rostrou.

The closet door slightly opened, and the boy's eyes appeared at the crack. He was too eager to remain quiet.

"I was afeard we were leaving you in a scrape," said Phil. "But there was no help for it. Things were growin' too blamed hot. We had to git."

"You needn't be afraid for me," returned Levi, coolly. "I am not going to be nabbed so easily. I had to run for it, though." He turned toward the table as he spoke.

"By the blazin' stars, I think you had!" ejaculated Phil. "Run so fast that you left half your coat behind. Why, Cap, don't you know that you've lost your coat-tail?"

A bitter curse fell from Levi's lips, as he put his hand behind him and discovered that this was the case. One skirt of his coat was missing.

"They jabbed at me as I went over the side," he said. "I felt a sort of jerk. Could it have been cut off?"

"Yes, it's cut as clean as a whistle," responded Phil, examining the stuff.

"Guess you mought find it, if you call on Cap Claxton," muttered Mike, from his refuge. "Least-ways, afore he puts it up at auction."

A sudden and disturbing thought seemed to have come upon the villain. He trembled and grasped a chair for support, while his face grew deathly white.

He felt his remaining pockets with the eagerness of intense anxiety.

"It is gone!" he cried, with a deep curse. "It was in that pocket. They have possession of it."

"Of what?" asked Phil.

"Of that paper we drew up yesterday. Our articles of agreement. Our names—our hiding-places—"

"Fire and brimstone!" yelled Phil. "Why, it's half a hanging matter. It must be got back, or our cake's all dough."

"That's the talk. We must get it back. And instantly—this very night. To lose that is to lose our whole game."

His voice was fierce and threatening. Yet the pal-lor had not left his face.

"I'd give a five-dollar gold-piece to be outen here now," thought the spy. "There mought be hot times for Cap Claxton yet, to-night."

"Call Jake, and see that your pistols are all right," said Rostrou, in a tone of decision. "We'll wake up the Fleetwing again. And if George Claxton crosses me, let him beware!"

His tones had a deep, deadly ring.

"But you are not going with that coat? You might lose the other skirt."

"And so make a jacket of it," replied Levi, with a bitter laugh. "But you are right. I have other papers in this inside pocket, which Claxton would give his head to get. I have put a hornet's sting in his heart, my lad, and these are the copies of the documents which did it. It is through me, if he but knew it, that his wife no longer will even bear his name."

He slipped the pocket with a proud smile of triumph, as he took off the torn coat and approached the closet where Mike was hid.

"I judge it safest to leave my papers at home. I have lost enough of them to-night," he remarked, as he flung open the closet door.

"Here comes Jake down the stairs," remarked Phil. "I will tell him what has happened."

"Very well," returned Levi, veering half round to answer him.

And there lay the boy, with much the feeling of the mouse in the clutch of the cat. There seemed no possible escape. He thought first of creeping around the legs of his foe, and making a dash for the door. But there were the other pair of villains!

There was no escape. He crouched like a hedgehog in the bottom of the open closet, only his face distinct in the ball which he made, his eyes burning like two diamonds in the shadow.

Levi Rostrou turned again to the closet.

CHAPTER VI.

MIKE IN THE ROBBERS' DEN.

"He will not capture these papers, anyhow," said Levi Rostrou, as he turned to the closet, with the torn coat in his hand.

Mike crouched still lower, feeling cautiously with his hand for some weapon to use in the expected struggle. But his glittering eyes were not, for an instant, taken off the face of the man whose feet almost touched him.

In fact this very closeness was in the boy's favor. Rostrou's eyes were on level with the upper wall, where hung the coat he was seeking, and he was not in position to see the floor of the closet.

"I will wear this gray sack, I think," he remarked, taking a coat from the wall, and essaying to hang the torn one on the same hook. But it slipped from his hand, and fell in a heap to the floor, covering the head and nearly all the body of the boy in its folds.

"Hang my awkwardness!" he muttered, stooping to pick up the fallen coat.

Mike could not see, but he felt this movement, and his heart beat like a trip-hammer, with the sense that discovery was now inevitable.

"What will they do with me?" was the thought that ran through his brain. "Murder me, at least—and worse than that if they can."

But to his inexpressible relief and surprise he heard his enemy say:

"Oh! let it lay. I have no time now to lose."

Flinging his coat on with a hasty movement, he ran to the door of the room, calling out loud to his confederates:

"Are you ready there?"

"Ay! Ay!" came back in hoarse tones.

"Then let us be off. There is not a minute to lose."

The sound of steps rapidly descending the stairs—the opening and loud closing of a door—and then utter silence; such were the records of the succeeding minutes.

Not until then did Mike lift his head, slowly pushing it through the folds of the covering coat, his shaggy hair and bright eyes emerging, and then his squat, vigorous form.

"You kin talk 'bout a weasel goin' through a rat-hole," he muttered. "But it ain't no circumstance. Why you couldn't pull a hoos-hair through the hole I've come through without scratchin' it. I 'spected to be salted and b'iled, like a kettle full of taters—and here I'm safe! Why if Levi the fox, knowed what a blind mole he'd been he'd grown himself. Ropes wouldn't stop him."

Mike had advanced to the center of the room, where the gas was still burning. He turned it up, and went back to the closet for the coat.

"Of course it ain't safe to take your papers out where Cap Claxton mought snatch 'em," he remarked, with a satirical smile. "It's allers best to leave 'em home, hangin' in a closet, where nobody'd ever think of goin' fur 'em. Sartinly not."

While giving vent to these words with a low laugh of triumph, Mike was rapidly investigating the pockets of the coat. From one of them he extracted a handful of papers, which he laid upon the table. He carefully examined the other pockets, but nothing further appeared.

"Guess I'll confiscate the papers," he said. "And then I'll hang up the coat on the same nail where I found it, so as he won't suspect. I wish I had a chance to get to the Fleetwing afore 'em; but that's no go. Cap Claxton'll have to hoe his own row; fer I ain't a-goin' out of this house till I know what it's made of."

Dropping the coat in a loose heap on the floor, made as it had been before, Mike took possession of his spoils, and left the room on a tour of investigation of the robbers' den.

Meanwhile the three villains were rapidly approaching the Fleetwing.

But they were destined to be late. After the disappearance of the thieves, and of Mike in their pursuit, Captain Claxton and the sailor remained alone on the vessel's deck.

"Let me see that document," he said to the sailor, taking from his hand the captured paper.

"Pshaw! It's too dark here to make it out. I have no doubt it is some confounded villainy, but I shall have to wait for a better light. Who's that?"

"It is your Custom House Inspector, I calculate," replied the sailor, laughing. "He's a fine smuggler's policeman. We might have got half the cargo out, if we'd wanted, while he's snoozing."

The man in question came up the cabin stairs, where he had been taking a nap in a state-room opposite that lately occupied by the captain. He was rubbing his eyes, as if not yet more than half awake.

"What's wrong?" he asked, with a show of great vigilance. "Didn't I hear some noises?"

"Well, yes," returned the captain, dryly. "We have had something of a naval battle. You're not a bad sleeper, Mr. Edwards. We've been attacked by a gang of river pirates. They are driven off now, though, and the ship is safe."

"I suppose I look like a sleepy-head," remarked the other, still rubbing his eyes. "But I have not had a wink of sleep for three nights. And I know Captain Claxton too well not to trust him. There is no fear of smuggling out of the Fleetwing."

The captain bowed in acknowledgment of this compliment; and a conversation of some length ensued.

"I have had all the sleep shaken out of me," remarked the captain, at length. "I think I will take a walk up town. It is a confounded dark night down here; but I fancy there's some life afloat yet in the heart of the city."

"And I will take a turn up to Spruce street," replied the inspector. "I have a matter to keep an eye on there."

The watchman walked the deck for some time after they had gone, with only the echoes of his own footsteps for company.

"Devil take it all!" he growled. "This is slow fun. I wish morning was here. It's all well enough afloat, but I don't like a night-watch in harbor."

He seated himself on a coil of rope, and began biting his nails for lack of better amusement. In ten minutes more his head was nodding. There seemed a sleepy influence hovering over the Fleetwing.

"Hist, there! Quiet! quiet!" came in low accents from the wharf. "Be careful how you lift those clumsy feet of yours, Jake! It's all still as death aboard the barque."

One by one three phantom-like figures glided over her side, barely visible in the dense gloom of the night. A lantern hung in the rigging, near the vessel's stern, but it threw only a faint light upon the deck.

Making their way toward the cabin, one of them descended, while the other two stood on guard.

Five—ten minutes elapsed. At the end of that time the figure reappeared. There was a fierce disappointment in the words that followed.

"Fire and brimstone! If the fellow hasn't given us the slip! The cabin's empty, and not a trace of the paper to be found high or low. I've got some little keepsakes, however, which may be useful."

"Then let's be sloping, for I'll be hanged if I like such dangerous quarters," spoke one of the men.

"Oh, you be fiddled!" exclaimed Jake. "There's not a soul but us aboard the hull craft. I wish to kingdom we had the skiff here now. But we mought unship the main hatch, and see if we kin pick up sublin' fur our trouble."

As he turned his foot slipped, and he fell with a thud to the deck.

His fall wakened the sleeping watchman. The latter sprang hastily to his feet, seized an iron belaying-pin, and rushed forward with a cry of: "Thieves! Robbers! Murder! Watch!" and other such yells of warning.

Jake struggled to his feet again, and a momentary fight ensued. But three to one were too great odds. After a moment a hard blow upon the head stretched the watchman insensible upon the deck. The three villains instantly made off, fearful of the effect of these cries.

Night and silence once more hovered alone over the good ship Fleetwing.

Had the trio of villains known all that was going on in their den, which they had lately left in such complete confidence, they might have hastened still more rapidly.

For Mike Merry was making a thorough investigation of the establishment, from cellar to garret, determined not to lose an opportunity which he would not be likely to have soon again.

Particularly did he search out the modes of ingress and egress, and made some interesting discoveries, which might be yet of value to him.

"Any fool could see that this stately mansion ain't rigged up fur no honest bizness," remarked Mike, after concluding his researches. "And if I don't circumnavigate 'em yet, there's no snakes. There's only one p'int missin'. I haven't found out where they keep their plunder. Howsomdever, here's two rooms yet which want ter be invetergated."

A faint light, from gas turned very low, burned in the room which he now entered. The door silently opened, under his pushing hand, and he walked in as silently.

In the dim shadows enveloping the doorway the boy's shadow looked like a denser shadow. As he

stood there, doubled in size by the faint light, and striving to get his eyes accustomed to the gloom, what was his surprise to hear a loud yell, that seemed full of a sense of terror.

"What's that? Oh Lord! Look there, John! There! there! there! In the door! It's little Joe's ghost!"

It was one of the wounded thieves, on whom Mike had intruded. He had risen on his elbow in bed, his face full of terror, while his pointing finger quivered with dread.

"Heaven save us!" screamed Tom, jumping from his bed, and rushing to the opposite wall, against which he flattened himself in blind terror.

"I knowed it would come! I knowed it would come!" cried the terrified Tony, as he shudderingly hid his face in the pillow. "Oh go 'way! go 'way! We never hurt you! It was Jake and Cap Rostrou."

Mike had not been this long without taking the cue. Had they murdered the boy, whose ghost they feared?

"I have come for you," he said, in a low, sepulchral tone. "The other's time will soon come, but I want you to-night."

"No! no! It wasn't us! You're mistaken, good little devil, it wasn't us!" screamed Tom, grinding against the wall as if he fancied it would open and let him through.

As for Tony he was too badly scared to speak. He buried himself deeper under the bed-covers, and clung to the bed with a wild determination not to be torn away.

"Can you swear it was Jake and Levi Rostrou that killed little Joe?" asked Mike, in the same hollow tone.

"Yes, yes, good ghost! They killed little Joe Tod! They flung you overboard from the boat, because you threatened to blow on them. Oh, go 'way! It wasn't us!"

"I will leave you then. But not for good. I will be after you again—before long—before long—before long."

As he spoke these last words in slowly-diminishing tones, Mike withdrew from the room step by step, the door, which he had held open with his foot, quietly closing after him. A moment more, and the frightful phantom was removed from before the eyes of the cowering villains in the room he had just left.

A low laugh broke from the boy's lips. It was heard within the room, but it sounded to the terror-stricken men like the hollow cackling of a retiring demon. They remained motionless and cowering while Mike made his way down-stairs.

"It's too good a joke to keep," laughed the delighted boy. "Such a saltn' no feller never got as I give them galoots. Little Joe Tod, eh? I think I've heered of that chape afore. Wonder if there ain't nuts in this?"

He was approaching the front door, with intent to make his way to the street, when he heard the sound of steps and voices outside.

Mike hastily retreated into the house, making for the rear rooms. He heard the door open, and the tread of entering feet. He heard, also, loud tones, and bitter curses as the men stamped forward into the hall.

"Sold, by Jiminy!" said Mike to himself, "or they wouldn't be cussing at that rate. Cap Claxton has counter-marched 'em, sure."

As they advanced Mike continued to retreat. He was now in the rear room of the first floor. The door was fastened with a bolt, which he carefully drew, and stepped out into the yard that stretched a short distance back behind the house.

Cautiously closing the door after him, in a minute more the agile lad had climbed the fence, and found himself safely out of that perilous habitation.

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE.

It was a rich, bright, warm-hearted summer day. The great city had put on its most cheerful smile, and its streets were full of the active and throbbing life, which had been so hushed and silent at the midnight hour of our opening chapter.

Noon rung from the neighboring clocks and steeples. A host of working people streamed out from work-room and factory, quick to make the most of their short interval of rest, and fully ready for dinner.

Among these we may include our fair friend Kate Claxton. She was engaged in some of those mystic trades, in which the smallest amount of pay for the greatest amount of work is the rule. The poor girl looked tired enough, as she sought a small restaurant in the vicinity to obtain her scanty dinner.

Yet, despite her humble garb, and the weariness of her step, there was something so attractive and beautiful in her face, that all who passed lifted their eyes in involuntary admiration, as if a sunbeam had shot across their path.

Her dinner eaten she took a seat in a neighboring public square, drinking in the influences of the fresh green grass, and the rustling leaves of the trees, and gladdened at heart by the exhilarating chirp of the saucy sparrows who hopped so fearlessly about her feet.

They were not afraid of her—not they. They were wide awake enough to know whom they could trust. If it had been a boy now—like the urchin just approaching—the birds would scarcely have been so confiding. In fact, they rose and flew away as he came up, with his loud whistle, and his sturdy tread. The young girl looked up, vexed to find her pets thus frightened.

"Well, I'll swan!" cried the boy, with a loud

whistle. "If it ain't my Katy, settin' here, jist as if she was one of the sparrows herself."

"Why, Mike, is it you?" exclaimed the girl. "I certainly did not expect to see you here."

"Oh! I'm out fur a constitutional," rejoined Mike, seating himself beside her. "Ye see I were up most all night, on bizness; and I've been takin' a mornin' snooze. Jist got through breakfast and come out fur a settler."

"I was not aware that you were in that line of business; turning night into day."

"That's jist my line," said Mike mysteriously. "I don't never talk 'bout it much; 'cos why, it's secret service. Rascal-catchin' is my bizness; and them birds is a sort of owls—they fly by night, and snooze by day."

"And owl-catchers have to follow their example," rejoined Kate.

"Exactly. You've got it as pat as if you was in the line yourself. It ain't no slouch of a bizness, Miss Kate. But I ain't no slouch of a feller, I ain't."

Kate looked at him with a smile lurking about her pretty mouth. There was something so sturdily independent and roughish about the boy that the smile broadened into a laugh.

"Oh! I'm a whole team, and there's no scratchin' that out," continued Mike, a little displeased at her merriment.

"I have no doubt of that," she replied. "And a fast team too."

"Two-forty ain't no touch to me," exclaimed Mike, as he drew himself nearer to his young lady friend.

"Say, Katy," he continued, dropping his voice to a mysterious whisper. "I struck ile last night heavy—a reg'lar forty-barrel well. And it's your provender, too."

"What is?" she asked, in surprise.

"Ain't got it in shape to tell yet. But I've got the dockments, all locked up at home. There's some p'int in 'em, howsomdever, I want you to help me to straighten out."

"I help you? Why certainly, Mike, if I can. But I don't see what I can have to do with your documents."

"Sartin you don't. You ain't a-goin' to know neither till I'm ready to open your eyes. And then if I don't make you think the world's made of cream cheese, don't talk! They're reg'lar eye-openers, them papers is." And Mike got up and danced an incipient jig on his half of the bench, as if he was too full to contain himself.

"And what do you want me to do?" asked Kate, in wondering surprise.

"Is 'pose it's suthin of a delicate question, and none of my confounded bizness, and all that," rejoined Mike, settling himself again, and putting on a look of intense sobriety, "but if you think I'm a meddlin' little busybody, and a stunted Paul Pry, and an impudent imp, why you kin jist say so, and then it's all settled. But I ain't, though, for all that."

"Then I will promise in advance, not to think anything of the kind," said Kate, with a merry laugh.

"I've knowed you folks fur a good spell," proceeded the boy, with the same serious look, "but I ain't poked my nose into none of your bizness. All I know is that there's a big screw loose somewhere. Now what I want to find out is, what's the whole mess of trouble atwixt your mother and Captain Claxton."

The smile suddenly fled from Kate's face, and was succeeded by a look of surprise and anger. Her lips became compressed, her eyes flashed.

"See here," continued Mike, "I ain't a-goin' to put no thumb-screws on you. It's bizness, Miss Kate. It ain't impudence. I've got a cake in the dough that I want you to help me bake, that's all."

"But what is the need of all this mystery?" she asked, looking him questioningly in the face.

"That's jist the kind of a mysterious coon I am," responded Mike, with a very resolute look. "We'll drop it right here, if you say so."

"No, no!" she replied. "I prefer not to talk about it. Yet it is no great secret. The world knows too much of it."

Mike settled himself down for the coming story, his keen eyes fixed upon the disturbed face of his fair friend.

"My father and mother are divorced from each other," she continued. "I think my mother has been greatly wronged. She was accused of dreadful things; but there was nothing but letters to prove them; and the court wouldn't accept them. But she was very indignant, and she got a divorce from my father. She took her old name, too, and that is why she is called Mrs. Northcote."

"She is awful down on Cap Claxton, I know," remarked Mike.

"Yes. She had great reason for indignation. And yet he was deceived by those letters. I presume he still thinks her guilty."

"I ain't quite so sure of that," replied Mike, shaking his head. "Why does he keep sending you things?"

"They are sent for my sake, I imagine," said Kate. "Poor papa, he seems to love me yet, though he has not seen me for several years."

Mike continued to shake his head.

"I don't b'lieve they're jist ready to tear each other's eyes out," he declared. "There's a sneakin' hankering atween 'em yet. A feller that only had half an eye could see that.—But I've got another question. What had Levi Rostrou to do with this bizness?"

"Levi Rostrou?" she asked, with a start of surprise.

"Yes, that identercal Levi."

"Why, he had nothing to do with it," was her firm rejoinder. "He was an old friend of mamma's. An old lover, in fact. But he did not appear in the divorce case."

"Ain't her friend yet, is he?"
"Oh yes! He visits us occasionally. Poor fellow, he was thrown into prison on a false charge, and has just been released, after six years' confinement."
"It's mighty queer how our courts put folks into prison on false charges, ain't it?" asked Mike innocently. "Do you know who brung this charge?"

"No," she responded.
"It was your own respected father, Cap Claxton himself."

Kate looked at him in doubt and surprise. She evidently had not known this before. She was about to question him further, with new-born eagerness, when her attention was distracted by feeling rather than seeing that a passer-by had his eyes fixed intently upon her.

She looked around. The gentleman had passed. She only caught the profile of his face as he looked back over his shoulder. He was a tall, strongly-built man, with something of the rolling gait of the sailor.

Mike looked toward him, and then at the face of his companion. She was pale and trembling, her hands clasped, her eyes fixed on the man with intense eagerness.

"That man! He!" she gasped. "Do you know him? Oh! tell me his name!"

"That is Cap Claxton," announced Mike, with an assumption of coolness.

Kate sprang to her feet, her whole form full of the instinct of flight. She seemed like a bird about to take wing. Thus she stood for a moment, irresolute, doubting, the color coming and going in her face.

At that instant a neighboring clock struck the hour of one, with a loud clang.

A look of deep disappointment flushing her face, she hurriedly turned, and sought the workshop from which she had emerged an hour before.

Mike, his hands in his pockets, his eyes at an elevation of sixty degrees, walked whistling away.

An hour later Captain Claxton made his appearance on Delaware avenue. He was on his way to his vessel, which he had not visited since leaving it the night before.

He had walked several squares down this avenue, with its row of old houses and maritime shops on one side, and the restless river, bearing at its wharves a succession of vessels of all shapes, sizes, and purposes on the other, when his attention was arrested by finding that a young man was looking him closely in the face.

This man stepped closer up on being observed, and asked:

"Are not you Captain Claxton, of the barque Fleetwing?"

"Yes," replied the captain, examining his questioner more closely.

"I have been down there to look for you. I am glad to have met you on my return."

"Indeed! And why?" asked the captain, noticing something hurried in the young man's manner.

"One of the sailors just discharged from your vessel has been badly hurt. A broken leg, I fear. He is in a bad strait, and wanted you to be sent for."

"You don't tell me that!" cried the kind-hearted captain. "Certainly I'll go see him. What's his name?"

"Jack Brace, I believe he calls himself."

"Jack, eh? A royal good sailor. He's been tipping I'm afraid. Why to be sure I'll go see Jack. Where is he, did you say?"

"At No. 764 Division street. He fell near there, and was taken in."

"That was certainly very kind of the folks—Division street? I don't know it."

"It is not far. I will lead you there if you wish."

"Of course, And I shall be much obliged to you for your trouble."

They walked on, side by side, the young man concealing a covert smile that would come into his face.

He was a tall, rather stout young fellow, with a somewhat sinister aspect of countenance. But Captain Claxton was too much absorbed in the accident to Jack Brace to be very observant of his guide.

They walked on for some distance, the captain asking a great many questions as to how Jack had met with the accident.

They at length turned from the main street they had been following into a labyrinth of smaller streets.

"This isn't the sweetest-smelling locality in the world," said the captain, with a sniff of disgust.

"No, the folks hereaway live like so many pigs, that's a fact," replied the conductor. "Now this is a more presentable street," he continued, as they emerged into a wider avenue.

"Are we near the place?"

"Yes. Very near. We are in Division street. And here is the house."

He stopped before a mansion that stood alone, an open lot of some width dividing it from the buildings on either side. Opening the door, with the freedom of a resident, he asked the captain to enter.

"This way," he said. "The poor fellow is in one of our second-story rooms. The doctor has been here, and I judge his leg is set by this time."

"All right, sir. You need not speak so loud; my hearing is sharp enough. Lead on, if you please."

The guide went up the stairs, followed by the kind-hearted captain. In a minute more he was ushered into a room on the second floor, where on a bed lay a man, with his face to the wall.

"Poor Jack," said the captain, stepping up to the bedside.

He failed to notice certain cabalistic signs behind him, or to hear certain soft steps upon the floor. He was not aware that his guide had been joined by another person.

"How do you feel, my boy?" asked the captain, bending over the seeming invalid.

The next moment he straightened himself up.

"There is some mistake here!" he cried. "That is not Jack Brace."

"Not a bit of a mistake," came a quick voice behind him.

Ere he could turn, a heavy blow, from some blunt instrument, fell upon his head. He dropped to the floor as if he had been shot, in dead insensibility.

And over him bent the cruel, triumphant face of Levi Rostrou, his white teeth glittering like those of a savage wolf.

CHAPTER VIII.

LEVI ROSTROU PAYS A VISIT.

Two days had passed since the occurrences narrated in our last chapter. Levi Rostrou walked up Spruce street, of a sunny afternoon, lost in a deep reverie. He was evidently not entirely pleased with the way the world was moving, his lips being compressed, his eyes flashing.

"Hang his obstinacy!" he muttered. "Does he have any fancy that he can wear me out by contrariness? I will have that paper, or George Claxton shall find that he is playing with fire. I would not wait long on his delays; but that I have an object in view. I have a rod in pickle for my good friend, the captain, that will make him squirm worse than to be locked up in my private cabinet. If I only knew what he has done with that agreement! However, I shall bring him to his senses yet. Meanwhile I must work out my other game."

He turned his steps southward, and gradually drew near that part of the city where dwelt Mrs. Northcote and her daughter Kate.

The latter was absent at her daily employment, and her mother was working about the house, and singing to herself in a low voice, as if something had occurred to please her.

She took a letter from her pocket, and seated herself to read it.

"I hardly know what to think of this," she said to herself. "After the way I have been treated, I feel half ashamed of myself even at the thought of forgiving him."

A quick rap at the door startled her, and she sprang quickly to her feet, dropping the letter on the table.

"Who in the world can that be?" she exclaimed.

"At this time of day? Oh! I suppose it's a beggar; or somebody with cabbage to sell. They come at all hours. Heigh-ho! I fancy the best way to find out is to go see."

Smoothing her ruffled hair with her hands she started for the door, just as a louder knock stirred the echoes of the house.

Hastily opening the portal she was surprised to behold, instead of the expected street merchant, a well-dressed personage, with finely-cut, rather handsome features.

She appeared to recognize him at once, a flush coming into her cheeks as she warmly cried:

"Is it you, Mr. Rostrou? I am so sorry to have kept you waiting. I did not expect a visitor to-day. Do come in!"

"You are looking remarkably well, Mrs. Northcote," said he, with a glance of admiration at her pretty, round face. "I suppose you have been wondering what had become of me."

"Why, yes; you have made yourself a stranger. But come in, do!"

"Business. That's a man's excuse, you know," he smilingly remarked, as he carefully wiped his feet and stepped into the narrow entry.

"And couldn't you contrive some business with me, and come oftener?" she naively asked, as she bustled about, handing him a chair, and taking his hat. "Not like the old business though. I have had enough of that."

She shrugged her shoulders with an air of great distaste.

"You have had enough, then, of divorce?"

"Don't speak of it. I am always hurt and sorrowful whenever I think of it. But I can never cease to thank you for coming to my aid as you did, in those dark days, and helping me to tide over my bitter trouble."

"Oh! that is my way," he said deprecatingly.

"And perhaps I had an object in it, too."

"Yes, the object of helping the unfortunate," she replied, with a feeling of gratitude. "I have not forgotten your kindness, Mr. Rostrou, and never shall."

"I am sorry to see you living in so poor a way here," he remarked, looking round the room. "You must have had a hard struggle. And my little Kate, does she not have to work very hard?"

"Yes, sir," replied the little woman, tears starting to her eyes. "I feel bitterly for the poor child. But there is no help for it. We must live, you know."

"To one who has been used to affluence," he said with a look of apparent pity, his hand falling carelessly upon the letter which lay upon the table. "I do not know how you can endure this want and penury."

"I do not know how I can help it," she impatiently answered. "I wish you would change the subject, Mr. Rostrou. What can't be cured must be endured."

His fingers were tapping on the letter, which slowly unfolded under his hand. He drew it with apparent thoughtlessness toward him as he again spoke.

"It may be cured, perhaps."

"I wish you would tell me how, then. I am sure I

am not fond of a fast for dinner and dry bread for supper."

"There are ways and means," he smilingly answered, his eyes falling upon the open letter.

"Excuse me," he exclaimed, with a quick start. "Here am I thoughtlessly reading your letter. But how dare he—how dare Captain Claxton—"

He paused, as if choked with indignation.

"It is too bad," she cried, seizing the letter hastily, and crushing it in her hand. "So careless of me to leave it lying on the table."

"But do you mean to say that you can forgive—can accept—after all that has passed—"

"No, no! Do not call it up to my memory!"

"To think of his impudence!" cried Rostrou, with a great show of anger. "To dare write to you! To make penitential offers to you! To seek to bring you again under his odious influence! Are you letting an impertinent effort like this make you forget the wrongs you have suffered; the indignities inflicted upon you?"

"You are right, Mr. Rostrou," she exclaimed, her face suffused with indignation. "I am ashamed of my soft yielding disposition. His sophistry was beginning to make a child of me again."

Turning she flung the letter with a hasty movement into the open stove.

"So goes all his efforts to draw me under his specious wiles," she cried.

Rostrou, who had risen, took her hand, his face full of admiration.

"That is right. I quite approve of that," he declared. "You asked me just now to make business for the purpose of calling upon you. It is business has brought me here to-day."

"I shall be pleased to learn its nature," she answered, slightly blushing, and making a faint effort to withdraw her hand.

"It is to withdraw you from this poverty. To replace you in that affluence to which you were born."

"Oh, Mr. Rostrou!" she exclaimed, her eyes filling with tears. "But how? How shall you succeed? I cannot accept charity, sir."

"But you can be charitable."

"I charitable? I have nothing to give."

She laughed, with a repressed sense of merriment at the thought.

"You have yourself to give! You have this dear hand to give! And to me, who will regard it as the richest gift in the world."

He spoke quickly and warmly, his keen eyes fixed with a magnetic look upon her blushing countenance.

"Oh, Mr. Rostrou!" she answered, snatching her hand from his grasp, and covering her face with both palms. "This is so sudden—so unexpected! Why I never dreamed that you were thinking—"

She could not go on, but broke into a laugh that was half hysterical, while her face was crimson with blushes.

"Yet you will not—you cannot refuse me!" he cried, with well dissembled eagerness. "I, who love you, who have always loved you."

He caught both her hands now in his, and looked into her flushed face.

"Oh, release me, Mr. Rostrou!" she appealed. "I cannot—indeed I cannot answer you now. I must have time to think—to reflect."

"Certainly you shall have time," he said, with his most winning smile. "But remember, Emily, that I was your lover even before you married George Claxton, whose name you have now justly discarded. Remember that it is not only love I bring you, but ease, plenty, affluence."

"Am I to sell myself?" she asked, struggling to release her hands.

"My love for yourself then. My wealth for Kate, your dear, sweet, beautiful Kate."

"Ah! that would make me happy indeed, to withdraw Kate from this black shadow of want, which is eating away her young existence."

She sunk back into her chair, irresolute, yet still leaving her hands in the grasp of the villain, who hovered over her like an evil demon.

But we must pass on to other scenes, and to a later hour of this same day. Day, indeed, has passed away, and night descended upon the earth. Thieves are once more abroad, and thief-catchers are on the alert, while honest citizens are supposed to be safely in their beds.

The nights are still moonless, and deep shadows rest upon the surface of the river, as the police patrol boat moves slowly along the front of the wharves. It is drifting with the tide, instead of being rowed, and ears and eyes are alert for suspicious sights and sounds.

Mike Merry is crouched in the bow, doubled up into a sort of ball, his fingers trailing in the rippling waters as he holds his hand overboard.

"It is mighty queer," he said, "bout that little Joe Tod. He was one of the sharpest little rascals 'bout the State House square. But he jist sunk out o' sight three months ago, and nobody knows what 'come of him."

"And the thieves confessed to killing him?" asked the coxswain.

"Jist so. Maybe it ain't so, but it looks queer. I've been huntin' little Joe up these two days, and nobody knows hair nor hide of him. The poor old rat, though, hadn't no folks nor home, so there weren't nobody to look after him."

"I hope Captain Claxton hasn't followed in the same path," said one of the rowers. "He's among the missing too."

"What's that?" cried Mike, starting suddenly up.

"He has disappeared. There has been nothing heard nor seen of him for two days. And the custom-house folks have been wanting him."

"Then I'll bet a brass monkey I know where he is!" exclaimed Mike, with great energy. "And I'm going for him, too, as soon as we get through with this trip."

"Hush!" came in a warning tone from the stern of the boat.

Silence fell upon them. The boat drifted on, while their senses were keenly on the alert.

"I thought so," was the next remark. "Turn her head in. There are odd noises about this wharf."

Silently the boat was rowed in, alongside of a large ship that lay moored in the darkness.

By her side lay a long, slender boat, quite unoccupied.

In a minute more the police had climbed the sides of the ship, only one man being left in the boat.

An instant uproar ensued. Cries, blows, shots, the fall of heavy bodies. The next moment, two or three men came hastily over the sides, leaping down into the narrow boat below.

"Hello!" we've got these anyhow!" screamed Mike, throwing himself across two of the thieves who lay prostrate. "Shoot the devils who are making off. It's Levi's gang. Don't let them slip you."

Some ineffectual pistol-shots followed, answered by defiant yells from the escaping boat.

The police turned to secure the two prisoners whom they had floored, and whom Mike still held captive.

CHAPTER IX.

CAPTAIN CLAXTON YIELDS.

The flying villains were safe from pursuit. The shots sent after them had proved ineffective, and ere the police could descend to their own boat and start in pursuit, the fugitive craft was buried in the shadows of the night.

But two of them were captured. That was something for the police to congratulate themselves upon. Ere the stunned men could recover their senses they were safely secured against any effort at flight.

"I know 'em, like a book," announced Mike, as he reluctantly yielded his close grasp of the prostrate men. "It's two of Levi, the fox's gang. This chap is the one they call Jake, and he's the thunderiest bound in the hull crew. This 'un is Tony Drake."

"Are you sure of that, Mike?"

"Sure of it? Ain't I sure of every thing? Did you ever hear me put my oar in afore I was sure? Guess you aren't very well posted in the consteruation of Mike Merry. Don't you be a-squirmin' now!" he exclaimed, grasping Jake, who showed signs of returning consciousness. "Haddn't some of you best freeze onto him, long with me? He's a reg'lar eel."

"You can let him alone, Mike," was the laughing response. "There is no danger of his getting away."

"Hanged if I'd trust him half as fur as I'd trust a weasel," answered Mike, doubtfully. "Howsom-ever, if you're satisfied, I am. Can't squat here holdin' him all night."

"Let him slide, Mike. We'll answer for him."

There was a burst of laughter at Mike's verandcy. But the boy was not yet at rest in his mind. He stood discontentedly eying the two men, as a hawk might eye a chicken, ready to plunge upon them at every movement.

"Come, Mike, we will have to christen you our rat-terrier," said Harry Bland, the coxswain. "Don't worry the poor devils any more."

The boy showed his teeth very much like a terrier, and his hair stood out with all the shagginess of a genuine rat-dog, as he watched the returning consciousness of the prisoners.

In a few minutes more they had fully recovered their senses, and lay looking up in sullen consciousness of their unlucky situation.

"Get up there," cried Harry Bland. "We have no more time to spend here waiting on you. You've come to the end of your rope, hang you, for a brace of thieving villains. Slide off with them, boys, to the station-house. Tim and I will look after the boat."

The captives rose sullenly to their feet, looking about them with savage, surly glances, but making no answer. Safely handcuffed, and in the midst of four or five stalwart men, escape seemed impossible, and they sullenly submitted to their fate.

But Mike had managed to bring himself up close beside the prisoner named Tony Drake, and now whispered in his ear, in a loud sepulchral whisper:

"What have you done with little Joe Tod?"

A loud cry of terror came from the lips of the man, on hearing this unexpected question. He turned pale as death, and quivered in every limb.

Even his sturdy comrade started violently, while a low curse escaped his lips.

"Who killed Joe Tod?" again asked the boy in his thrilling whisper.

"It wasn't me! I had no hand in it!" was the terrified response. "It was only—"

"Hold your infernal tongue, you blasted jackass!" yelled Jake, with a savage oath. "Can't you see, shoot you, that they're playin' on you? Yer a blamed sight too short in the brains and too long in the tongue. Who's Joe Tod? I never heered tell on him."

"Nor me, neither," said Tony, with a weak effort at defiance.

"We know all about it," returned Mike: "so there's no use tryin' your stale tricks on old gunners like us. The whole set of you will swing fur the murder if you don't pony up the truth."

"That's all blow," cried Jake, defiantly, though with an involuntary tremble. "We never seen nor heered tell of no Joe Tod. So dry up, my game chicken."

Tony, apparently reassured by the defiance of his

comrade, made no further answer, but stood in sullen but pallid silence.

"Take them off!" said Harry Bland. "We will look into this business hereafter."

The manacled prisoners were helped out of the vessel, and taken away over the wharf, and up into the streets of the city.

Yet in the event it proved that Mike was right in his distrust. For, as they were turning a dark corner, the sturdy prisoner Jake gave a quick, forcible surge against the man to his left, flinging him prostrate into the street.

The next instant he was off, at a wonderful speed for a man of his weight. Though vigorously pursued, he quite outran all his pursuers, and managed to escape, leaving only Tony Drake in their hands.

The two men who had chased him came back sullen and furious.

"I'll swear if I ever thought a handcuffed man could run like that," exclaimed one of them. "And dodge—you never saw such dodging. It was no use to fire at him."

"You used to be a good runner, Trim," said one of the others.

"Oh, the bound turned a corner and dodged into some hole—some thieves' den. He flung us, that's sure. You'd best put the nippers on this other one, or he might pay us in the same coin."

While these events were transpiring, occurrences of equal interest to us were in action in another quarter of the city.

The situation of Captain Claxton calls for our attention. For two days now he had been confined in a dungeon-like room, in the underground region of the house to which he had been entrapped.

The document, so perilous to the villains, which was the main object of his capture, had not been found upon him. He had concealed or deposited it somewhere, and all the promises and threats of his captors had failed to make him reveal the locality in which he had left it.

Captain Claxton could be determined enough, when his obstinacy was aroused, and he had made up his mind not to be coerced by violence into the yielding of this paper. He had only hastily examined it, and did not understand its full significance; but the efforts made to recover it gave him a new conception of its importance.

The threats of his first day's imprisonment had been partly put into effect during this second day. The food which they had at first given him was now totally cut off. Evidently the intention was to starve him into submission.

It was midnight of this second day when he was aroused from a fitful and uneasy sleep by the opening of the cell door, and the entrance of a person bearing a lamp.

The captive sprang from his cot, and stood looking with eyes that glared with anger upon this intruder.

"Levi Rostrou!" he exclaimed. "Do you dare show your villainous face in my presence?"

"Sit down, and keep cool, captain," replied the villain. "Don't try the violence that is in your eyes. I am armed and you are not. You might get hurt."

He drew a pistol as he spoke, and held it in his lap, while his piercing eyes were fixed on the prisoner.

"What brings you here? Is it to murder me? If so here I am. Empty your pistol in me, and make an end of it."

"Don't be in such haste, my dear sir," rejoined Levi, with a fiendish laugh. "The time will come; but I am not ready yet. My revenge does not begin with murder. It begins with torture, and ends with death."

"And so you are intending to starve me?" asked the captain.

"Oh, no! you are at liberty to have your freedom. I am only reducing your diet a little to bring you to your senses. That paper I must and will have, or we will see how long you can live on air."

"That paper you shall not have, if I die for it!" was the defiant answer.

Captain Claxton flung himself sullenly upon his bed, and turned his face away from his persecutor. The latter continued to talk, but the captive made no sign to indicate that he even heard him.

"Very well," Rostrou at length said. "I will leave you for another day. Perhaps by that time starvation may have brought you into a more reasonable mood. But it might be best for you to be at liberty just now, for another reason."

"What is that?" asked the captive, without turning.

"Only I think that you might like to attend the wedding of your old friend Levi Rostrou, with another old friend of yours, one Emily Northcote."

"What! Devil!" yelled the captain, springing from the cot with one furious bound, and standing like a tiger, ready to leap on his persecutor.

"There, there, captain!" said the latter, raising his pistol with a warning gesture. "Consider your health. It may not be agreeable to run upon a bullet."

"Lying hound! She would not look a second time at a man like you!" hissed the captain.

"Perhaps she might not, if you were only free to write her letters—like the last one you sent her," was the reply. "You see I am fully in her confidence. She showed me your precious epistle, and we had a long confab together over your impudence in sending it. I think that made her more ready to have a protector, like Levi Rostrou, to save her from further insult."

"False wretch!" screamed the captain, his face working with the violence of his emotions. "If I was but out of this—"

"Why of course I want you out of this," interrupted Levi, in a calm tone. "I want to give you a chance to attend the wedding. Your presence would give such tone to it. Return me that paper, and you are free."

"Return it?" cried the captain. "Will you swear to set me free if I put it again in your hands?"

"Certainly I will. It is the paper I want. Not you. It is not my game to hurt you physically. I only intend to repay you some of the mental torment which you have made me suffer in my long years in prison. You have had your day. It is my turn now, George Claxton."

"It will be your turn yet," replied the captain, eying his foe with lowering fury. "You have the upper hand now. We shall see— But a truce to this. Bring me pen, ink, and paper, and I will write you an order for the document—after you have sworn to release me."

It now appeared that the villain had not come alone to the dungeon of his captive. For he turned and spoke to a man who stood just outside the door, directing him to bring writing materials.

Levi Rostrou had no hesitation in taking an oath, as demanded by his prisoner, to release the latter as soon as he should receive the desired document. Yet on this oath Captain Claxton placed very little reliance. He was now doubly eager for liberty, and felt obliged to trust that self-interest would induce his captor to keep his word with him.

"The paper is in my room at the Lafayette hotel," said the captain, as he wrote the promised order. "Here is the key of my trunk, and directions to the hotel clerk to open it, and procure you the paper. I have told him just where to find it. My word is kept in this paper, Levi Rostrou. Can I depend on you keeping yours?"

"You can. After the paper is safely in my hands you shall be released."

"Very well," continued the captain, handing him the order. "And now leave me to myself. I have seen quite enough of you for one night."

Captain Claxton made no effort to conceal his fury and detestation of his foe. His eyes blazed with anger, even as he forced himself to comply with the villain's demand.

"Very well. You will not see me again soon," returned Rostrou. "But I will keep my word. You shall be set free—after I have the paper."

There was a satiric meaning in these last words, and a triumphant laugh as the captor locked the cell door upon his captive, which grated horribly upon the ears of the latter.

A narrow slide in the door opened, and the voice of the villain spoke, in a tone of calm malignity.

"I think I had best invite you to my wedding reception, Captain Claxton. It may not be safe to set you free till after I have secured your wife."

The prisoner flung himself back on his bed with a groan of dismay. He had been deceived; and he had played his best card into the hands of his captor.

Sleep was impossible. He lay for an hour, his mind full of bitter reflections and of angry passion. If he could but have had Levi Rostrou again within his reach, no fear of the pistol would have hindered him from an effort at revenge and escape.

But what was that sound without the door—that faint scratching noise?

The captive raised his head in an attitude of attention. The sound came again, followed by a slight rap.

"Who is there?" he asked.

"Hush!" came the warning reply. "Is it you, Cap Claxton?"

"Yes."

"That's all hokey! My name's Mike Merry. Keep quiet as a mouse now. There's fun afoot."

CHAPTER X.

CAPTAIN CLAXTON IN PRISON.

It was with no light impulse of joy that the imprisoned man heard this familiar voice at his cell-door. The last words of his jailer showed that the latter intended to play false with him. And it might be that this boast of an intention to marry his discarded wife was based on truth.

No one can hope but that another may find the treasure which he has idly thrown away, and Captain Claxton's heart was turning to his divorced wife with a new impulse of affection which made this threat very painful to him. In fact the fear had been growing in his mind that he had thrown her aside on too light evidence, and a conviction of her innocence was forcing him to bitterly regret his past action.

Her continued refusal of his advances only strengthened this feeling in his mind, and made him at once more eager to overcome her fixed indignation, and more timid at the thought of approaching her. He was satisfied that any hasty action on his part would only deepen her distrust and anger, and that he could regain her only by slow and imperceptible advances.

With this thought in his mind, it was naturally an excessively painful knowledge to him to learn that another was seeking the jewel which he had flung from him and this other his deadliest foe. And here he lay, in the power of this base wretch! He saw plainly now in what Rostrou's plan of torture consisted. He already felt the torment to which his foe had doomed him.

Naturally, then, he gave a cry of joy on hearing the voice at the door, and the name of his irrepressible young friend.

"Drop that noise," exclaimed Mike, in a loud whisper. "Tain't no place and no time here for chit-chat. Why, Cap, this concern of a house is jist alive with ears, and I'd catch particular old Jacob if any on 'em heered you."

"But how did you get in here, my boy?" whispered the captive, in reply.

"That's my secret. I've been through these diggin's on a committee of investigation afore. There ain't a turn nor a hole in 'em I don't know. If Levi, the fox, knowed he had sich a weasel as me 'bout him wouldn't he squirm? Well, I rayther guess so. But how's this thunderin' old door hooked together?"

"It is bolted and locked, or at least I judge so."

"Locked!" cried Mike. "Burn it all. I'd a notion there weren't nothin' but bolts."

He felt the door in the darkness, and convinced himself of the truth of what he had heard.

"You are not able to open it then?" asked the captive in a tone of disappointment.

"Hang it all fur a blasted piece of impudence, no!" cried Mike. "Why the Jerusalem couldn't they been satisfied with bolts? Guess they must have smelt this child a-comin'." And I dunno where the key is no more nor thunder and lightning."

It was with supreme disappointment that the captive heard these words. He had entertained such a sudden and eager hope of escape, that the reversal was hard to bear.

"You're an old 'coon, Cap," Mike again remarked, with his usual slight show of respect. "You oughter know a thing or two. Ain't there no way to get a lock open without a key?"

"What sort of lock is it?"

"It's a heavy padlock."

"If you could only cut it, now; if you had a fine steel saw," mused the captain.

"What's that?" asked Mike eagerly. "Could a feller cut iron with a saw?"

"Just as easy as they could cut cheese with a knife," was the answer. "So they had the right sort of saw."

"And where kin you git sich saws?" asked Mike eagerly.

"At any watchmaker's, I suppose."

"That's all sublime," returned the boy in a joyful whisper. "I'll git now. But jist you keep a stiff upper lip till to-morrow night, and if you don't see me back here with that sort of a cheese-knife, you kin say I'm a blower."

"Are you sure, Mike?" anxiously asked the captain. "Can you get into this place in safety again?"

"Don't you be a-worritin' 'bout that. I kin go through it like a rat kin go through an apple-barrel. Good-by, Cap. And don't you be too sound asleep at this time to-morrow night."

The whispered colloquy ceased. For a moment the faint patter of footsteps was evident, as the boy retreated, carefully feeling his way in the dark.

Then all was silence. The whole house seemed lost in slumber. The senses of the captive were painfully on the alert, for the first sound of that uproar which would attend the discovery of the intruding boy.

But as minute after minute passed, and silence still reigned, he became reassured, and sunk back on his couch, yielding himself to a slumber which anxiety had hitherto prevented.

It was at a late hour of the next morning when the sleeping captive returned to consciousness. Night and day were almost the same in that underground cell, only a faint light making its way from the outer day to his eyes.

The lamp which his captor had borne had been taken away again, as if with the intention to subdue him by the combined force of darkness and hunger.

It was with surprise, then, that he now opened his eyes to perceive a lamp burning on the small table, which formed part of the scanty furniture of his cell. And ranged beside the lamp were the material of an ample breakfast.

"Good!" cried the captain, gladdened at this welcome sight. "The starvation policy is abandoned, then? That's some comfort, for I am a poor tool without my regular meals. He must have the paper, or I wouldn't be faring so well this morning."

But the captain did not trouble himself, now, about such ulterior considerations. The question of satisfying his biting hunger was of more moment to him than all the papers in the world.

It was not many minutes before the table looked as if a small army had made breakfast upon it; for the plates were as completely empty as plates could very conveniently be.

"There," said the captain, leaning back in his chair, "I've laid in rations for a good two days more, if they want to try the starving policy again. Infernal rascal as Levi Rostrou is he has one good point; he knows how to get up a good breakfast."

The worthy captain did not realize how much an eager appetite added to his enjoyment of his morning meal.

"So he has some virtue left, then," came a mocking voice from the door.

The captive turned, with a start. There, at the opening in the door, was the hated face of Levi Rostrou, looking in upon him with his most satirical expression.

"Yes, I would say you were a gentleman now, if you would do one thing more," replied the captain, with a forced appearance of coolness.

"Ah! and what shall that be?"

"Just go down yourself; and send me a notice of your funeral, I don't know what would be better news."

"Good," exclaimed Levi, with a mocking laugh. "I am glad to see you in so merry a humor. By the way, I forgot to tell you that your order worked like a charm. I have got the paper back."

"That is no news," coolly replied the prisoner.

"It is not, eh?" in a tone of surprise.

"No; you have notified me of that already, in sending me a light and a breakfast."

"Ha! You are quick in coming to a conclusion."

"And now I expect you to keep your word by releasing me."

"Oh, certainly," rejoined the villain. "I took my oath to that, and I am much too conscientious to break my oath."

Captain Claxton said to himself that he was not too sure of that; but he made no audible answer.

"I promised to release you after regaining the paper," continued Levi. "So I will. But you must remember that I did not say how soon after. I hardly think it would suit your health or my plans to let you out just yet."

"I thought so," returned the captain. "That's what comes of trusting a convicted thief. Will you be kind enough, then, to take your ugly face from that door? It is not agreeable to have to sit here with the devil grinning in on me."

"Look out now!" warned Levi, with a flush of anger. "You have had your breakfast; but you might cut short your dinner."

"Will you go, or shall I spoil your countenance with this lamp?" cried the captain, seizing the dangerous missile. "Thief and hell-hound that you are! do you suppose I will bridle my tongue to cringe to you for food? Why I would die a dozen deaths of starvation first."

Levi partly closed the aperture before replying. He did not quite like the gleam in his captive's eye, nor the aspect of the raised lamp.

"I wish further to announce to you," he now remarked, "that I have paid a very pleasant visit this morning to Mrs. Northcote. I found the pretty little woman charmingly agreeable. And you should have seen how eager she was to have the marriage take place soon. We had quite a lively talk over the efforts of her old husband to coax her back again. Fortunately she despises him too much to yield to any of his sophistry."

He closed the aperture suddenly, just in time to save his face from being cut by a plate which his captive had flung with great force, and which shivered into fragments against the strong oaken door.

A mocking laugh followed as Rostrou walked away, leaving his victim with set teeth and glaring eyes, ready to fling himself on the door, and seek to tear it from its hinges.

"Oh, but that I was out there for two minutes! for two minutes only!" he cried. "But the villain lies! She would not look at, or listen to him. He is but seeking to torment me, as he threatened. I will let him see in future that I am proof against his schemes."

He flung himself violently upon the bed, by no means as satisfied with this conclusion as he tried to persuade himself that he was.

The day moved on, with no further events than that another meal was passed in to the captive. Rostrou failed to return again.

The prisoner's mind was now fixed upon one thought only, that of the possible return of Mike, with the requisite means of effecting his escape from that dungeon-like cell.

Liberty, liberty, was the one hope which thrilled through his brain. Freedom first, and afterward revenge.

But it was with many a misgiving that he awaited the coming of the set hour. Would the boy succeed in obtaining the needed saw? Could he again enter the house without discovery? Could they escape the vigilance of Levi Rostrou in their flight?

And now a new feeling of vexation came into the worthy captain's thoughts. What real occasion was there for this lurking action? By what strange thoughtlessness had he forgotten to advise Mike to inform the police, and have a descent made upon the house in force?

He gritted his teeth with anger as he thought of his stupidity, and growled inwardly at the romantic fancy of the boy, which made him seek this adventurous mode of action, rather than the plain process of informing the authorities.

The captain became anything but pleased with himself, or with Mike Merry.

Hour after hour passed by. Time moved with dreary monotony in that close cell, and despite the anxiety, and the need of wakefulness in the captive, sleep came upon him. Ere the night was very old he was slumbering away, with dreams having no close connection with the features of his situation.

Yet finally a vision came upon him in which he found himself chained fast in a drear underground apartment, in utter darkness, and with the continuous gnawing of a rat's teeth in the wall near his head. There was no means of escape. Every instant the animal came nearer. He was helplessly exposed to this ravenous brute.

There was indeed a sound—a low, scratching noise—which probably induced this unpleasant dream. The captain's nightmare was broken by the cautious pushing back of the rusty bolts of his dungeon, which grated slightly in spite of the utmost care.

"Why the thunder didn't I fetch a spoonful of ile!" came in low, vexed tones, as the grinding sound continued.

The captive's lamp was no longer burning, and he was unable to see, in the dense gloom, that the door was very slowly opening. But he could not fail to hear the low creak of its hinges, and he leaped from his bed in joy.

"Is it you, Mike?" he asked, in a whisper.

"I don't believe it's anybody else," answered the boy. "I hadn't had my skin up to auction for any other feller to buy out; and I've only got to pinch it to know that it's myself inside it."

"You cut the lock?"

"If I didn't, there's no use talkin'. I've got the saw here—Oh, blazes! there it goes; dropped outer my clumsy fingers. An' there ain't no light to find it with ag'in."

"No matter, Mike. We are done with it. It may

serve for some other poor prisoner who is lucky enough to find it."

"That's so," said the boy. "And now, let's be gettin', for every minute's an hour, now. You've got to tread on feathers, Cap. Any noise may bring the hull caboodle down on us. Give me your hand. I know the way out."

It was with throbbing hearts and intent senses that they felt their way slowly onward to the stairs; every foot being placed with the utmost caution ere another step was ventured.

"Why didn't I tell you to bring a pistol?" whispered the captain. "We may have to fight our way yet."

"Hush!" warned Mike. "Not a word. Here are the stairs. Look out for creaks."

Step as carefully as he could, the stairs creaked somewhat beneath the captain's heavy tread. Several anxious minutes were occupied in reaching the landing above.

Here an excess of caution produced a sudden catastrophe. Supposing that there was still another step, the captain lifted his foot for the purpose of placing it upon it. But they had already reached the level, and the unlucky foot came suddenly down with an alarming crash.

Nor was this the greatest of their misfortunes. For the captain was thrown partly forward by his misstep, striking the door, which stood ajar, and flinging it open with a noisy clatter.

Captain Claxton stood dismayed by his awkward stumble, but Mike had his senses more about him.

"Come on!" he cried, dragging him forward. "The jig's up! There is nothing but to run for it! The front door is the easiest!"

As they hurried through the darkness, the noise of voices and quick steps sounded throughout the house.

They were at a disadvantage in having to grope their way in the darkness. The loud voices and quick steps came hurriedly on. The flash of a light shone through the dark passage.

"Hallo! here's the door!" cried Mike. "Now, Cap, be on your stumps to dig and git."

For a moment the boy fumbled about the lock. It yielded to his hand. The door was flung open.

"Git's the word!" yelled Mike, making one leap into the street.

The captain came staggering after him, having stumbled again in his hasty movement outward.

"Hold your level!" exclaimed the boy, assisting him with his hand.

And now, with a quick spring, an agile form followed them into the street, grappling with Captain Claxton. A quick, fierce, violent struggle ensued.

"Smash him, Cap! Flatten his nose! Break in his knowledge-box, or they'll all be on us!" yelled Mike. "Let me help you."

The strong arms of the boy grasped their foe, dragging him backward, so that the captain was enabled to tear himself from his grasp.

"All clear, Cap!" asked Mike.

"Ay! ay!"

"Then git, like lightning!"

Captain Claxton needed not a second warning. He started off at the top of his speed, not looking back, but fully expecting that Mike was immediately behind him.

It was not until he was six or eight squares distant from the scene that he discovered that he was alone.

"I must have taken a different route from the boy," he said, reducing his pace to a walk.

He had indeed taken a different route, for Mike, overpowered by numbers, was at that moment a prisoner in the hands of his foes, and being dragged back to the empty cell.

He kicked and struggled like a young hyena, but all his efforts only resulted in bringing him some fierce blows from his incensed captors.

It was now discovered that the lock of the cell had been cut.

Mike was searched for the saw, but nothing was found upon him.

"He must have got rid of it," said Levi, who was one of his captors. "No matter, I fancy the bolts will hold our young rat. Let us see if he can gnaw his way out."

There was a loud laugh as they fastened the door upon their new prisoner.

"All right, coveys," muttered Mike. "I bet you a team of oxen you find Mike Merry's teeth sharper than you think."

CHAPTER XI.

KATE CLAXTON HAS A DOUBLE SURPRISE.

"Will you have another cup of coffee, Kate?" asked Mrs. Northcote, as they sat at their humble breakfast table. "It is going to be a damp day; and it will do you good."

"Yes, mamma," answered Kate, passing up her empty cup. "But not so much sugar, please."

"It is not often that we indulge in too much of anything, my child," said the mother, smilingly. "It is a sign of prosperity to be able to oversweeten our coffee."

"Since my wages have been increased," rejoined Kate, "we have lived extravagantly."

"I shall never get over my surprise at that increase," said the mother. "They were always so very close and mean with you. I do not understand their sudden generosity."

"People will change, you know," answered Kate, with a mysterious smile. "Let me help you to another piece of the meat."

"No more, thank you, my dear."

Kate was evidently seeking to change the subject. There was some mystery connected with her increased wages which she did not care to have her mother discover.

The latter fell into a reverie, her head resting on her hand, as she looked absently across the table.

"Do waken up, mamma dear," spoke Kate. "You are off in a regular day-dream. I must be away in five or ten minutes, and then you will have all day to dream in."

Mrs. Northcote fixed her eyes on her daughter, a peculiar expression coming into her face. She apparently wished yet dreaded to speak.

"I have something strange to tell you," she at length said.

"Something strange?" repeated the surprised girl.

"I had a visit, day before yesterday, from Mr. Rostrou."

"Ah!" exclaimed Kate, looking up in quick interest.

"Kate, my child, don't be surprised at what I am about to say," continued the mother, with a deep flush. "Mr. Rostrou generously offers to remove us from this poverty, and to place us in the affluence to which we have been accustomed. He wishes—"

"But what is his price for this generosity?" interrupted the girl, hastily. "Men don't usually so overflow with kindness. What does he want in return?"

"He wishes to marry me," replied Mrs. Northcote, in a faint, wavering tone, as if afraid of the effect of this announcement.

Kate started to her feet, and walked hastily backward and forward across the room.

"I hope you did not accept him?" she asked, turning suddenly upon her mother.

"No, my dear," doubtfully.

"I am glad of that."

"But why? Mr. Rostrou is a gentleman. He has been our friend. In the great strait of my life he was more than a friend. He aided and consoled me so that I cannot but feel grateful to him. He—"

"Do you love him?" was Kate's quick query.

"My child—you are so sudden. I hardly know—"

"I know—don't marry him, mamma."

"But, Kate, it will not do to be so hasty in our conclusions. Consider—"

"Where has this generous man been during the weary years of our want and poverty?" interrupted Kate.

"Why, you know, child, that he was in prison, on a base and false charge. He has been but lately released."

"We have only his own word that it was a false charge," replied Kate, doubtingly. "And as for his present wealth, what have we but his own word for that?"

"But, my dear, you don't doubt—"

"Yes, I do doubt. Did he ever tell you, mamma, how he came to be in prison? Who put him there?"

"I never asked him that."

Kate was preparing for the street as she spoke. She had her hand on the door-knob, as she turned to reply.

"I have learned who did it!"

"Ah! who was it?"

"It was my father—Captain Claxton."

The door opened and shut. Kate was gone.

But she had left her mother stupefied with astonishment. It was decidedly a dramatic situation, and the little woman stood as if thunderstruck, her hands upraised, her eyes fixed immovably upon the door.

"Captain Claxton!—George!" broke from her lips. "Can it be? Where has Kate learned this? And what am I to understand by it?"

At that very moment Captain Claxton was walking in a somewhat irresolute way through the streets.

He had gained a few hours' sleep after his escape, but was too restless and uneasy to continue in slumber after daybreak.

"It is confounded curious," he said to himself. "I can navigate the Atlantic, but I'll be keel-hauled if I can navigate one of these bee-hives they call cities. Such a confounded twitification of streets, and no plain sailing anywhere. Here I've been hunting an hour for that thieves' den, and blame me if I can find it."

He walked on, in a desultory way, quite bewildered, and fancying that every new alley might lead to the place sought.

"I wonder which way Mike steered?" he asked himself. "The little rat knows the streets as well as I know the seas, and I suppose he's made a straight streak for a harbor. But I'd like abominably to salt Levi Rostrou."

He walked up to a policeman, who stood leaning negligently against a tree.

"Can you tell me where Division street is?" he asked.

"Not exactly. It is somewhere up-town."

"What? Isn't it down in these latitudes?"

"No."

"Then I've been sold cheap, that's all."

He tried to describe to the policeman the street he was seeking, but he had gone there first so heedlessly, and left there at last so hurriedly, that he had a very cloudy idea of its appearance and situation. The city guardian could make nothing of the indefinite description.

"I suppose I'll have to give it up," muttered the captain, as he walked on. "Though I would have liked to settle down on my friend Levi, at home; and squish him there. It's lucky, anyhow, that Mike and I got off."

He would not have felt so easy in his mind if he had known that Mike was, at that moment, a tenant of the dungeon from which he had escaped.

Nor was he aware of the fact that a man was cautiously tracking his every step. This man had followed him from his hotel; had kept him in sight through all his devious course; and had approached

near enough to overhear his questions to the policeman.

A look of satisfaction came upon the fellow's face, as he saw how thoroughly the worthy captain was at sea.

"No fear of his bringing the cops on us," the man soliloquized. "He knows no more than a blind cat where to find our head-quarters. Guess I'll let him slide, and go report to the boss."

Captain Claxton continued his walk, utterly unaware of this pursuit.

The eyes now fixed themselves in an uncertain way upon the face of a very pretty girl who was approaching him. A faint flush came into his weather-beaten cheeks. Some unwonted emotion was busy at his heart.

"What the thunder and Mars ails me?" he asked himself. "Who is that tripping little beauty?"

The girl at this moment first observed him. Her emotion was much greater than his. She turned red, then pale. Her step flagged for an instant. Then she came quickly forward, with hands extended.

"Don't you know me?" she cried. "You look so strangely. You must know me!"

"By all that's good!" exclaimed the captain, in a voice like a hurricane. "What! this tall, pretty, bouncing young lady—it can't be my little Kate!"

"It is your little Kate then," and the young lady flung her arms around him, and kissed him with the warmth of a long-repressed affection.

"You don't tell me that? Well, who'd ever have believed that my baby Kate—" and he hugged her with force enough to make her bones yield. "But is it you in real earnest?"

He held her off, while his eyes perused her glowing face.

"Indeed, it is me. Your own Kate!" she laughed with hysterical joy. "I am just going to work, and I've only got a minute to spare. But I don't care if I am late."

"You might be late all the rest of your life if your mother would only— Say, Kate, is she as bitter on me as ever?"

The beautiful girl clasped his hands, and looked with warm affection into his face as he answered:

"I think she is weakening, papa. But there is—but," she hesitated.

"I know what you mean," he exclaimed. "There is somebody else, some smooth-tongued and foul-hearted rascal—"

"Why I hardly think Mr. Rostrou is that," she interrupted.

"Ha! Then it is he? It is Levi Rostrou? And she has promised to marry him?"

"Not yet, papa," she looked up into his face with a roguish smile.

"She don't know him, Kate. There ain't many such silver-plated tongues. He could make you believe it was blue sky when it was raining bullets. But, for all that, he's the infernallest hound out."

"Is it true that you put him in prison?"

"So you've heard that?" he spoke in surprise.

"Come, Kate, I'll walk along with you and tell you all about it. But I want first to know. Did you use the little bank deposit I made for you?"

"Yes. And mamma thinks it is only an advance in my wages."

"You little witch!" kissing her again. "But come. I'll tell you all about Levi Rostrou."

They walked along, side by side, the middle-aged, handsome, vigorous captain, and the slender, beautiful girl in whose pure young face only a distant image of his could be seen.

And as they went he told her a story new and strange to her.

Meanwhile poor Mike Merry remained the occupant of a dungeon. Nor did there seem any early chance of his escape, in the captain's ignorance of his detention, and of the locality of the den.

"I ain't a-goin' to put up in this hotel none too long; you kin bet your bottom dollar on that," soliloquized the boy, who had never before been confined in such close quarters. "I don't like the rooms; and there ain't no billiard-table handy. Jest fetch along my bill, waiter, for I want to catch the next train."

But no waiter came, and Mike was left alone with his thoughts.

"There never was sich a lucky bit of awkwardness as when I dropped my saw file down here," he remarked. "Guess I'd best be investergain' fur it. It's a-goin' to be a mighty useful bit of steel."

Getting down on his hands and knees he commenced a close groping over the earth floor.

At the same time Levi Rostrou had just received the report of the spy whom he had placed to dog the footsteps of Captain Claxton.

"Good," he replied. "I was fearful we would have to make a quick move. But if he is so much lost as that we need be in no hurry."

"Had I best watch him further?"

"Yes," said Levi, throwing off the dressing-gown he had been wearing, and walking to the closet for his coat. "I am going out, but you can tell the lads that I will be back in an hour or so."

He opened the closet door and took down his coat from the hook.

"By the way," he continued, "there lies my torn coat, just where I dropped it the other day. Very careless in me, considering that it contains those tell-tale letters. I guess I had best shift them to a safer place."

He picked up the coat, and plunged his hand into the pocket for the letters.

The next moment there burst from his lips a cry of alarm, mingled with an oath. Quickly he thrust his hand into the other pockets.

"By the eternal blazes!" he yelled. "They are gone! Did George Claxton get them too? No, no! they were here when I threw down the coat! It has

been one of my men, and I'll be shot if I don't make him sorry— Or was it that boy?"

This thought seemed to strike him strongly. With a loud cry for "Jake," he burst from the room and rushed down toward the cellar.

Mike had just laid his hand on the missing saw when he heard the loud sound of voices and the tramp of coming feet.

He raised himself in an attitude of attention, and awaited their approach.

CHAPTER XII.

THE THIEVES' DEN RAIDED.

It was a busy day with Captain Claxton. It was very important that he should give immediate attention to his duties as master of the Fleetwing. The operation of unloading was to be looked after, and it is not surprising that, in his multiplicity of business, little thought of Mike Merry came into his head.

A sort of undefined expectation of seeing the boy ran through his mind all day. He thought that Mike would certainly seek the vessel, if only to learn the particulars of his escape. Therefore a shadow of disappointment rested upon the captain's mind, when night came without bringing the boy.

His own strange absence had also to be explained, and he could not sufficiently blame his stupidity in not being able to rediscover the locality of his imprisonment.

The story spread among the police authorities, and the succeeding morning Captain Claxton received a visit from Harry Bland, a sergeant of the harbor police.

"I have heard of your adventures, captain," said the latter, "and also that the boy, Mike Merry, aided in your escape. But the question is, what has become of the lad? He is always with us, but he has not turned up these two days."

"You don't tell me that?" answered the captain, in some alarm. "Why, the spy little fellow took to his heels behind me, that I am sure of."

"But he may have been captured by the gang?"

"That's true enough," rejoined the captain, musingly. "If he has a free foot it is queer he don't turn up."

"They say you have lost sight of the locality of your adventure," continued Harry Bland. "Will you describe it to me as well as you can remember it? I know something of that part of the town."

Captain Claxton, in response, gave a long and confused account of the route he had taken, in which the only distinctive feature was, that it was a three-story brick house, with an open space on each side.

"Not very definite," said Harry, with a shake of his head. "But I think that I know where it is. Mike gave me some points about it. Now my idea is that the boy is locked up there, and that we had best make a descent upon it. Do you think you would recognize the house if you could see its front?"

"Yes."

"Then come with us. We will make a raid upon it."

"In an hour. I cannot leave here just now."

"Very well. I will get my men together."

It was in the neighborhood of noon that a half-dozen men, accompanied by Captain Claxton, made their appearance in the street containing the headquarters of the gang of river thieves.

The worthy captain's doubt vanished when he found himself before the house to which he had previously been lured.

"That is the place for a three-master!" he ejaculated. "I may be all at sea in your streets; but I don't go back on my eyes. I'll wager a cargo of diamonds that's the precise locality."

At this assurance the police quietly laid their plans for the intended raid. Part of the force was sent round to the rear, to prevent the escape of the inmates in that direction.

Giving them time to get into position, the three men who remained with Captain Claxton in front approached the sleepy-looking house. Although it was noontide the windows were tightly closed, and the whole face of the mansion bore a quiet and innocent expression, as if it had gone to sleep the night before, and had not yet wakened up.

A loud pull at the bell brought no response. It was repeated, and followed by noisy raps upon the door. But no one answered, and the establishment remained in its slumbering state.

"There must be some way of wakening them up," cried Harry Bland, varying his knocks with fierce kicks upon the closed door. "Why, they must have had a set-out of opium last night, the way they are snoozing it off to-day."

"Perhaps they suspect our purpose," suggested the captain.

"We've got to get into the house, anyway. We'll make them sure, then, of what we are after. Do you run around, Tim, and see if you can get in from the rear."

One of the men started in response to this command, while the others impatiently awaited the results of his action.

But quiet and deserted as the street was, the people in some of the neighboring houses had ears, sharper, as it seemed, than those in the assailed mansion. Curious eyes appeared at the windows. They were followed by the opening of a door, from which an old man emerged.

"Want to get in there?" he asked, with a nudge of his finger toward the house.

"Why, it does look a little that way," rejoined Harry Bland, sarcastically.

"Something queer about that house. Our folks have had a good deal of talk on it."

"You have, eh?"

"Yes. There don't seem to be no women about the concern."

"And rascally sleepy men," ejaculated Harry, with another kick at the door.

"Spry enough, I guess," said the old man.

"The blazes they are! It don't look much like it." "Why, my friend," continued the garrulous old fellow, "you might kick there till doomsday, and you'd only wear out your boot-toes. There's not a soul in the place. They moved out, bag and baggage, before eight o'clock this morning."

At the same moment the front door was flung open from within, and the man who had been sent to investigate appeared.

"They've given us the slip," he cried. "The place is as empty as a powder horn after a day's gunning. Not a living soul in it bigger than a rat."

"Curse," not loud but deep, broke from the lips of the police, as they rushed into the empty mansion.

But we must go back a little in our story and return to the adventures of Mike Merry.

He stood, concealing in the palm of his hand the slender, watch-spring saw he had just found, as he awaited with surprise the coming steps.

"What in Moses has broke loose now?" he muttered. "It can't be this they're after, or they wouldn't come like a set of wild bulls."

He was answered by the flash of a light through the cracks of the door, and by a hasty flinging back of the bolts.

In a moment more Levi Rostrou had entered the cell, with flushed and angry face. He was followed by the sturdy form and harsh face of Jake.

"By thunder!" cried the latter, "it is the same little water-rat that's in the harbor perlice gang. We were there the night I giv' 'em the slip. Blast him, I'd not stop long to choke 'em."

"Like you choked—" Mike defiantly began. But he prudently stopped. It might not be safe to refer to Joe Tod here.

"Choked you, hey, you wharf snipe?" asked Jake, threateningly. "Do yer mean to say—"

"Stop that!" cried Levi, authoritatively. "We are not here to bawdy words with the boy, but to search him for those letters."

"Oh ho," said Mike to himself. "So that's the dodge? Lucky I left them home."

He backed as he spoke until his hand rested upon the stone wall of the cellar.

"I ain't got much convenience here for letter-writin'," he said, standing in an easy, careless attitude. "If you kin shake any such stuff outter me, all right. I don't b'lieve it."

"Search him, Jake," was Levi's brief command.

"Sail in," returned Mike, defiantly. "Won't take long to go through me. I ain't got more nor half a dozen pockets, and I've a notion you'll find holes in the bottom of some of them. Anyhow they don't hold marbles and shoe-strings worth a cent."

There was a feeling of triumph in the boy's mind as he spoke. While leaning against the wall he had managed to slip his slender saw into a crack between the stones. That safe, they were welcome to find what they could upon him.

Jake's search was rough and thorough. Not only the boy's person, but the bed, the floor, every spot where a package of letters could be hidden, was vainly examined.

"Don't pan out mighty well, does it?" asked Mike, in sarcasm. "I ain't never set up for a letter-writer. Nary time. If you'll send me down some of the ingrejets, though, I'll try my hand."

"The boy hasn't them," growled Levi, turning with a lowering look to Jake. "It rests among you men."

"Among us men, hey!" ejaculated Jake. "I'll be fiddled if it rests among me. And what the thunderation you're raisin' sich a row about some old letters for, I jist can't see. What's in a letter?"

"Ruin, sometimes," returned Levi. "Come, there is nothing here."

"But see here, Mr. Levi, I'm dead tired of these diggin'," cried Mike. "I don't like your hotel, and I'd like to know when you're goin' to kick me out fur not payin' my bill. If you don't give me my walkin' papers I'll take 'em myself. I ain't goin' to puterize this here establishment, that's flat."

"All right, boy. You may go as soon as you feel in the humor," came in a mocking laugh from the door, as the bolts were shoved in with a loud clang.

"You've been so good at opening locks, from the outside, let us see what you can do with bolts from the inside."

"Good enough," Mike coolly responded. "Calculate I'll leave 'bout two or three to-morrow mornin'. Want to catch an early train, you see. Needn't send anybody to wake me up; but you'd best leave my hill on the office desk, so as I kin settle it afore I go. I'm one of them chaps as like to go as they please, and pay as they go."

"Very well," came the mocking voice from the door. "Don't oversleep yourself."

Mike listened, as the steps moved away, and silence again succeeded.

"I've a notion the old fox don't more nor half b'lieve me," soliloquized Mike. "But that's his look-out. A feller ain't bound to make himself a liar 'cause somebody else don't b'lieve him. We'll see, afore mornin', if Mike Merry's the chap to go back on his word. But I've got to get a long snooze now if I want to be wide awake when the time comes for shinin'."

Mike threw himself upon the bed, and in ten minutes was as sound asleep as if he was in a palace instead of in a damp underground cell. He was never very particular about his accommodations, and his connection with the harbor police had forced him to do great part of his sleeping by daylight, so

he had no difficulty in dropping off into a dreamless slumber.

Several hours passed before he woke up. He was roused then by a knock upon the door of his cell.

Springing quickly to his feet Mike found that there was a light shining in at the open grating in his cell door.

"Wide awake there, my hearty, if you want any supper," came a hoarse voice. "Here's your rations."

"Want my supper? You kin bet your eye-tooth on that," responded Mike, cheerily. "Pass her in here. And if you want to see victuals fly jist stand and look on."

"Haven't time," was the laughing reply. "Lend me your lamp then. So as I kin see the way to my mouth."

"Feel for it. Then you'll know the way better, next time."

"All right. It's jist as I said though. I won't puterize this arrangement fur another night. You folks dunno how to keep a hotel."

The man laughed again, as he closed the grating and left the cell in darkness.

Not entirely in darkness, as yet, however. For a gleam of the departing light shone through the cracks of the door. Mike's sharp eyes were fixed upon the middle of the vertical crack between the door and its frame, and he gained some important information.

"Two pieces of half-inch iron to go through," he muttered. "And the door 'bout two inches thick. That's clever. My saw is a good four inches long. So I've got plenty of play."

A good appetite supplied the lack of variety in his supper, which consisted of dry bread, and a few slices of bacon.

"Tain't first chop," said Mike, "but I guess I kin eradicate it."

His supper ended the next duty on hand was the recovery of his saw.

This proved not quite so easy a task as he had anticipated. He had felt sure he could go directly to the spot where it was hidden, but he soon found that he was slightly mistaken in this idea.

It is no easy matter to put your finger on an exact spot in pitch darkness. Mike found abundance of cracks between the stones; but no saw.

Fortunately he was sure of the light of the spot where he had hidden it, and he now commenced a cautious circuit of the cell, carefully feeling every crack at that light, and on the look-out not to knock the slender instrument onto the floor.

"Lucky I've got time enough to be careful," muttered Mike, after an hour had been fruitlessly consumed. "The thing is so blamed thin that I might have passed over it 'thout feelin' it."

He went slowly back again, over the same ground he had already passed.

"Good for our side!" he at length cried. "I did slip it, sure enough. Here's the little joker, safe and sound. I hope they won't forget to lay out their bill; for I ain't in fun. I'm going to shake this hotel."

Mike lay down and took another snooze. He did not care to begin work till after midnight.

It was, indeed, one o'clock in the morning when at length, wide awake and cautious as a fox, he commenced the operations necessary to his release.

The slender saw easily passed through the narrow crack in the door, and its edge was soon upon the iron of the upper bolt.

Yet the boy at once found an unthought-of danger. The bolt lay loosely in its socket and yielded to the motion of the saw. This had the double disadvantage of decreasing the effect and increasing the grinding noise of the instrument.

But a remedy soon suggested itself. This was simply to set his shoulder against the door, pushing it out so that the bolt was rigidly bound in its socket.

Now the saw cut much more rapidly, while the noise was reduced. The latter could not be entirely hindered, though he constantly wet the blade in his mouth, in lieu of oil.

"That's the hominy for our soup!" cried Mike, at length, as the extremity of the blade fell downward. The bolt was severed.

The captive lost no time in beginning operations upon the remaining bolt. Constantly on the alert against detection he worked on, slowly and cautiously, soon biting through the iron with his keen-edged instrument.

The door, pressed upon by his shoulder, suddenly flew open. Freedom lay before him.

He waited, however, for several minutes, to discover if the slight noise of the opening door had given the alarm.

No sound came from the upper house. Mike began a slow movement outward from his cell, chuckling at the thought of the surprise of his captors in the morning, when they would learn that he was a boy of his word.

Nor did he misjudge their surprise and alarm, on discovering the cage door open and the bird flown.

It was no light uproar that took place in that house the next morning, and the whole establishment rung with the curses of the infuriated villains.

"We must git out here quicker'n greased lightning!" exclaimed Jake. "That boy ain't no sea-captain, an' he knows these diggin's like a mouse knows cheese. Git's the word."

That the others fully agreed with him was shown by some of them being immediately set on guard against an apprehended descent of the police, while others procured wagons. The result was that by eight o'clock in the morning the house was entirely unfurnished, and the birds flown.

It was this that the harbor police found on their entry into the deserted house. They were not long, under Captain Claxton's guidance, in reaching the

cell in which he had been confined. But it was open and empty. There was no Mike to be found.

"And see here!" cried Harry Bland. "If the bolts aren't cut I'm a sinner! The boy has slid, and that's what's the matter with Hannah!"

"You kin bet your everlastin' bobberlation on that," came a youthful voice behind them. "You see, fellers, there weren't room enough fur gymnastics in that 'establishment; and I never feel good 'thout my gymnastics."

"Blame me if it ain't Mike himself!" ejaculated Harry. "Where have you been, boy?"

"Tryin' to stir up the perlice to investigate this 'rangement," said Mike. "But I didn't wear patent-leather boots and a high hat, and I hadn't no influence with the perlice. I then went fur the harbors, but hang a harbor was to be found. Then I jist walked up here, 'thout 'specting to find company. So the fox has slid."

"Slid's the word, Mike. There ain't a hair nor a toe-nail left in the edifice."

CHAPTER XIII.

A TRAP TO CATCH A FOX.

SEVERAL days have passed since the date of our last chapter. But they have not been quiet days with our characters. Captain Claxton has been busily engaged with the unlading of his vessel, though he has found time to attend to some other matters of importance. The police authorities, fully satisfied now of the character of Levi Rostrou's gang of river thieves, have been earnestly occupied in endeavoring to trace them, but without success. The chief effort has been to discover the parties who moved their furniture; but this has, so far, failed. Even Mike, who had some knowledge of their haunts, has failed to discover their present place of concealment.

There is another purpose in this search besides that of seeking to capture them as river thieves. Tony Drake, the imprisoned member of the gang, had turned State's evidence, and given his testimony as to the death of little Joe Tod. Levi and his gang are wanted on a charge of murder as well as of robbery.

"Is Captain Claxton aboard?" asked Mike, as he sprung to the deck of the Fleetwing, a few days after the incidents described.

"Yes, you will find him in the cabin."

"All serene, my hearty," returned the boy, walking aft with his independent air. "Guess I'll make a call on the captain."

"Hallo, Mike, is that you?" cried Captain Claxton, looking up from the paper he was diligently perusing.

"Well, I think it's a bit of me," responded Mike. "That's my hat, and them's my boots; and this feels like me inside 'em."

"And what news have you, boy? Has anything turned up?"

"Not of much 'count. The cute fox keeps close to his hole. Nobody has nosed him out yet. I seen your Katy this mornin'."

"You don't tell me that!" exclaimed the captain, starting up with a delighted face. "How is she, Mike? What did she say?"

"She's jist as pretty as a picture, and as lively as a cricket. And she thinks that her papa is jist ice-cream and watermelon mixed. That's the kind of a gal she is."

"She spoke of me then, Mike?" he asked, his embrowned face flushing.

"Spoke of you? Why, she was running over with you. I'd think she'd swallowed you alive some time if you weren't here now all together."

"Dear Kate! She does love me then! Did she say anything more?"

"Yes. Mrs. Northcote has had a letter from Levi."

"The deuce you say!" cried the captain, with mingled anger and surprise.

"It's gospel fact," returned Mike, with a very solemn look. "He ain't done fishin' for her yet. I shouldn't wonder if he'd git her too; for she's down on you, Cap Claxton, the wust way."

"I know it," rejoined the captain, with a subdued groan. "I believe now that I was deceived. I believe she was belied by some villain. If it is so I cannot blame her for her indignation."

"Think it was Levi Rostrou, hey?"

"I didn't think so at the time. But I am beginning now to imagine that it was he who separated me from my wife for some purpose of his own. He had been a lover of hers before she married me, and may have never forgiven me for winning her."

"And what was the job that put him in the stone jug?"

"It was a business something like the present one. He was caught in the act of stealing goods from the old Statesman, of which I was mate at the time. It was my oath that convicted him, and I hardly think that has softened his feelings toward me."

"I don't s'pose he is b'ling over with love for you," answered Mike, with a comical shrug. "But does Mrs. Northcote know any of this?"

"I fancy not. She thinks he is her friend, and that he has been falsely imprisoned."

"That's what I judged. And now the next question is, how are ye goin' to show her what sort of a sour-apple he is."

"That is jist it, Mike," answered the captain, reflectively.

"I tell you what it is, Cap," replied Mike. "I've got a few letters here which go a bit past my education. I want you to jist spell 'em out for me. I'll take a turn on deck so's not to disturb you while you're at it."

It was with some astonishment at this unexpected request that the captain saw Mike take a small pack-

age of letters from his pocket, lay them before him on the table, and turn toward the stairs, saying:

"Take your time, Cap. Be sure you git at the pith of 'em. I ain't in no sort of hurry."

Captain Claxton sat for a minute looking after the vanished boy, and wondering what he was up to now.

"I suppose the best way to find out is to try," he said, crawling toward him the package.

A few minutes afterward, while Mike was walking leisurely about, chaffing with the sailors, and watching the busy labors of the unloading, he was startled by a loud call from the cabin.

There stood Captain Claxton, his hat flung back, his face flushed crimson, his hands gesticulating violently.

"Here, boy!" he cried in a loud tone. "Come here, quick! Tell me where, in the blue blazes, you got those letters!"

"Found 'em interestin', did you, Cap?" Mike coolly inquired, as he walked aft. "I'd a sneakin' notion you might pick up somethin' out of 'em wuth readin'."

He descended into the cabin after the excited captain.

"Where did you get them?" was the fierce reply. Captain Claxton was in no mood for joking.

"Do you remember a dokymint you got out of the fox's coat-tail pocket?" asked Mike.

"Yes, certainly I do."

"Then all I've got to say is that you ought to took the hull coat while you was at it; fur them letters come out of the breast pocket of that identical coat; and I'm the chap that confiscated 'em."

"By heavens, boy, you're a diamond of the first water!" exclaimed the captain, springing up and grasping Mike's hand. "But when and how did you get them?"

"When I had that free blow in the pirates' den, 'bout which I've told you the hull story. Didn't give no chaff then 'bout these letters, 'coz I hadn't had time to interview 'em."

"The black-hearted bound!" hissed the captain. "He has sold me his whole game. And to think that he kept these, and carried them about loose in his pocket!"

"Oh, the smartest chaps have got a bit of the fool in 'em, somewhere. I s'pose you might find a weak spot even in Mike Merry, if you'd go ever him with pins. Likely Levi had some other game to play with them papers."

"Did he intend to marry my wife, and then let me know what an infernal gull he had made of me?" asked the captain, in a musing tone.

"Like enough. I can't post you altogether though, as long as I don't know what's in the wind."

"Why, boy, these are copies of the letters which drove me to sue for a divorce from my wife. I have the letters yet, every one of them. Nobody could have had a chance to copy them. But that ain't all. These are in the same handwriting; and it's plain to see that they're the first copies that the others were made up from."

"They ain't all the same writin'," said Mike. "I made that out."

"No. It is plain that Levi Rostrou wrote them all; and that the witnesses who appeared on the trial were some of his gang. Oh! what an egregious fool I have been!"

"It's allers a good sign when a chap finds that out," rejoined Mike, coolly. "I s'pose, some day, I'll be findin' out the same thing 'bout myself. But what's the next move, Cap?"

"To show my wife what a horrible game has been played upon us. She must forgive me after I show her how I have been deceived, and what a consummate scoundrel her new lover is."

"That's the tack!" cried Mike, delightedly. "But you musn't go near her, Cap."

"Why?" in a surprised tone.

"'Coz I've been talkin' to Harry Bland 'bout it. He wants to use your wife as a bait to catch our foe. Now Levi's too sharp to show his nose if he finds you about. He'll have spies out—that's what Harry Bland thinks. You must keep shady, and let me do the bizness through Kate."

Captain Claxton remained, for several minutes, in a musing attitude.

"I suppose it is a good idea," he at length said, "though I am not much given to these roundabout ways. You say that she got a letter from Levi?"

"Yes. And he shows his hand plain. He's after marryin' her yet. Hallo, here's Harry Bland now."

The handsome sergeant of the harbor police walked down the companion-stairs as Mike spoke.

A long conference ensued between the two men assisted by an occasional shrewd remark from their boyish confederate.

Harry was made fully acquainted with the state of affairs, and a plan was concocted, by which the concealed villain would probably be caught just at the apparent summit of his success.

It was agreed that Mike should act as their messenger and spy, and that he should communicate only with Kate, away from the house, so that no hint should be given the villain of the plan laid to capture him.

Mike was by no means loth to undertake the task thus laid out for him. He had been for some time acting for the harbor police, and it was a sort of duty very much to his taste.

"I'll bet three shillin's and a brass button they don't counter-march on me!" he cried. "If I don't sail into their affectionous there ain't no use talkin'."

"I hope you will, Mike," said Harry. "These fellows are river thieves, and are our game. Let us show the shore folks that the harbor boys are wide awake when their time comes."

The next day, at noon, Mike might have been seen

seated on one of the uncomfortable seats in one of the public squares of the city, with a huge sandwich in one hand, and a large cut of cheese in the other. Munching away as contentedly as if that was all the world was made for.

"Tain't a bad idee, nohow," he said to himself, taking a mighty bite from his sandwich. "Bread and ham is better fodder than kings used to get, so I guess I oughtn't to kick ag'in it. If I only had a cracker now, to give tone to the cheese, wouldn't I be happy? And if I had a doughnut to top off with! My eyes! Queen Victory wouldn't be nowhere."

But as no such queenly vlands hopped up from the earth or dropped down from the air, Mike contentedly munched on, satisfied with the foretaste of perfect luxury which he derived from cheese and ham sandwich.

"It's queer what's come of Katy," he muttered.

"It's 'bout her time."

He looked intently up one of the approaching paths. Some distant form had attracted him.

"It's her, sure enough," he said, with great satisfaction. "Thought she wouldn't go back on her word."

In a minute or two more he was joined by Kate Claxton, her bright face full of pleasure, as she returned his hearty greeting.

"I'm mighty glad to see you," he remarked, making way for her on his bench. "Hungry?"

"Oh, no! not at all."

"Best take a bite o' sandwich. It's prime, I tell you."

"Thank you," replied Kate, laughing. "But I don't feel like sandwich."

"Try a nip of cheese then. It's jist tiptop, except that it ain't got no crackers to go with it."

"I never eat cheese on Tuesday," rejoined Kate, still laughing.

"You dunno what you've lost then; that's all I've got to say," replied the boy, with the utmost gravity, as he took another vast bite.

"I wanted to see you to-day," remarked Kate.

"I have some news."

"That's prime," answered Mike, as soon as he could speak. "I was jist wantin' doughnuts for to top off with. I reckon good news 'll do as well."

"Those letters had the most wonderful effect on mamma," said Kate. "I believe she was softening toward papa, as it was. But they have opened her eyes in regard to Mr. Rostrou. Poor mamma, she felt dreadfully bad about it."

"Shouldn't wonder," returned Mike, nibbling at his cheese.

"To think what a danger she was in. If she had married that man—"

"But she isn't goin' back on it!" cried Mike in alarm. "She ain't a calculatin' to fly the game?"

"No. She will carry it through."

"That's clever. Has she wrote her answer to his letter yet?"

"Yes. And delivered it."

"Delivered it?" exclaimed the boy, in deep surprise. "Why, how the sour buttermilk— Who did she deliver it to?"

"It was called for, by a well-dressed young man."

"Well, that's rich papers! That'll be nuts fur Cap Claxton and Harry Bland. I s'pose she drewed it up 'cordin' to Gunter. All O. K., weren't it?"

"She followed the directions, exactly," replied Kate, rising.

"You ain't goin'?"

"Yes. My time is up."

"You haven't had a bit of dinner. Won't you try some sandwich? There's more here than I kin eat," asked Mike, persuasively.

"I am ever so much obliged. But you must excuse me. I am not hungry for sandwich to-day," answered Kate, as she walked off.

"I wonder now if she was too stuck-up to eat after me?" queried Mike. "Howsomever, good victuals can't be wasted. I've got to go through it, as long as she won't. Some folks don't know what's good."

CHAPTER XIV.

A RIVER CHASE.

THE crew of harbor police to which Mike Merry had attached himself, did their work by night, very seldom appearing on the river during the day. Yet their boat was out upon an afternoon a few days after the events last recorded.

Mike formed one of the party on this occasion, sitting crouched in a heap, on the bottom of the boat, near Harry Bland, who held the tiller.

"There don't seem to be a bit of fun afloat, now-a-days," he grumbled. "Since the night we caught Tony Drake we've been only playin' Sunday. A feller might as well be in bed, fast asleep, as diggin' fur fun round here."

"It is our business to put down thieves," answered Harry. "If we frighten it down, so much the better."

"Only it's so sinful monotonous," rejoined Mike. "It's like goin' a-fishin' and never gettin' a nibble."

"I think we had a decided bite that night on the Fleetwing," observed Harry. "And we caught our fish when we grabbed Tony Drake. It wasn't no credit to us, though, that the other chap got off."

"Oh! he's a high old coon. He's first luff of the gang. But is it so that Tony has peached? Let the cat out of the bag 'bout little Joe Tod?"

"Yes. He accuses them of murdering the boy. He was knocked overboard with an oar, because he would not mount a vessel at their orders."

"That's murder, anyhow," said Mike. "Old Levi ought to swing fur that if he gits what's owing to him."

They rowed slowly on in silence for some minutes, the men pulling with a lazy, half-drowsy motion, as

if they were moving the oars only to keep them from falling asleep.

"I have not got the hang of this business between Captain Claxton and Levi Rostrou," remarked Harry. "Have you picked it up, Mike?"

"Yes, a bit at a time; and piced it out the best I knowed how."

"Let us hear it, then. I would like to understand it better."

"Want me to begin at the beginnin'?" asked Mike. "Or shall I take a nip at the tail first, and then take a bite out of the middle, and so git round to the head, jist as it come to me?"

"No. You'd best start at the head end, and slide off at the tail," rejoined Harry, laughing.

"Well, then," said Mike, adjusting himself more comfortably, "it runs 'bout this way: It seems that once, years and years ago, Levi hadn't bu't loose from honesty; and he courted the same woman with Cap Claxton. But Cap held a trump hand, and won the game. Now there ain't much forgive 'bout old Levi. He jist set himself to git even with Cap and waited. There's fox enough 'bout him to wait, you know. And somehow his honesty weren't true grit. It giv way and he come out river pirate. But 'bout this time Cap Claxton fell out with his wife. Got all sorts of letters making out that she was a bad woman; and heard of men—some of Levi's gang, mind you—ready to swear to the same thing."

"A thundering rascally game," interrupted one of the men.

"Jist that," resumed Mike. "Well, there was a divorce come of it all. And there was that Levi, who was moving the strings all the time, why he jist froze to the little woman as if he were the only friend she had left. I dunno all he was up to, fur he got a spoke in his wheel that blocked his game."

"What was that?"

"He was nabbed robbin' a vessel. Cap Claxton was mate then, and he swore the fox into Cherry Hill prison. A good six years' go. You kin bet that didn't make him love Cap any more. He ain't been out long, but I needn't tell you that he's got his gang together, and that he's goin' for Cap like a 'possum after persimmons."

"But I don't quite see what he wants to marry the woman for," said Harry Bland, in a questioning tone.

"Cause the chap always had a fancy fur her," rejoined Mike. "And more than that cause he knows that Cap Claxton is gettin' sweet on her ag'in. You see, Cap's come to the notion that he treated her bad. He's tryin' to transmogify her back, but she don't transmogify with a cent. She's down on him like a bootjack on a cat. And she don't know but what Levi's all ice-cream and pound-cake."

"She didn't know, you mean. I presume she knows it now."

"That's so. But if we don't catch old Levi with her fur a bait, we might as well giv up the ghost, and go to hucksterin' oysters."

"I hardly think that the fox will run the risk," remarked Harry.

"Maybe not. But he's got it on the brain. He wants to marry the woman, and then let Cap Claxton know what a fool he made of him. That's what he kept them letters for."

"That must be it," returned Harry, musingly. "It is a long-winded sort of revenge, but is jist the kind to suit a deep devil like this Levi. If Cap Claxton still loves his old wife, it would be a sore cut to him to find that she was innocent, and had got married to the rascal who made her out guilty. It's what I call mighty far-fetched!"

"But stingin'," rejoined Mike.

The boat floated on down the stream, yielding slowly to the indolent strokes of the oars, whose movement had become even lazier during Mike's narration. The men were too much interested in the story of Levi Rostrou's deep-laid scheme to be in the mood for any vigorous exercise.

They now moved on more rapidly, the boat's head turned slightly toward the wharf line, as if to make land at some distance below.

Another boat, moving up-stream, had been for some time approaching them. It was rowed by two men, and appeared to be a fishing skiff, a net being coiled up on its stern.

"What luck, boys?" asked Harry Bland, as the two boats came near each other. "Have you had your net out this morning?"

"No. We are going up the river to take the tide," replied one of the two men. "Have jist started out."

"How are the fish running?"

"Slim enough, you kin bet yer bottom dollar on it," spoke the other man. "The river's fished out, ther ain't no goin' back on that. Why, 'tain't wuth shucks to be a shader now-a-days; and the heurta' run mighty poor, too."

Mike had roused himself from his careless position on hearing the last speaker, and looked keenly up into his face. It was but a glance, though, and he then fell back into his former listless attitude.

"That's a very narrow-beamed boat for a fisherman," said one of the men, after the boats had separated. "It don't look fit to carry a heavy haul."

"It has carried more than one heavy haul," Mike quietly remarked.

"Ha!" exclaimed Harry, "you know the boat, then?"

"Don't you?" asked Mike.

"I've a notion."

"I wish you'd jist make fur the piers, and set me ashore," continued Mike. "I'd like to take a stretch 'long the wharves."

"You are sure it's the boat?" asked Harry.

"Could swear to it. That last feller that spoke is Jake, or there ain't no Jake a-goin'." I reckernized

his voice at sight. And I got a squint at his face, too. I could swear to him on a pile of turnips."

"Hain't we best give them chase?" asked one of the men, suspending the motion of his oar.

"No," rejoined Harry. "There's something in the wind in this move. It is not our game to let them see that we suspect them. Do you think you can run them down, Mike?"

"I can try," Mike replied. "No feller can't say fur certain. But I've a sneakin' notion that they're my game."

The boat was now headed more directly for the wharves.

"You can try your luck, boy," said Harry, as Mike prepared to land. "Bring back a good report of yourself."

They grazed the wharf-log. The boy caught at a short length of chain that hung over, and ran up like a cat.

"I've got my eye on 'em," he cried back. "They ain't further than Market street wharf. I bet a cow I fetch 'em. Here's for the go."

He ran quickly back over the wharf, while the boat put out again into the stream.

The boat in advance was now some four squares ahead, and was being pulled, with a steady stroke, up-stream. But it was out in the center of the up-flowing current, and the boy had little difficulty in keeping it in sight.

He ran rapidly up Delaware Avenue, now jostling with a sturdy sailor, now gliding round a portly fruit merchant, now stumbling over a pile of chain, or colliding with an astonished sea captain. For the narrow pavement of this riverside avenue was crowded with persons more or less interested in navigation, and it was no easy matter to thread the crowd at a rapid pace.

"If you are in such a royal hurry, why don't you slide into the street!" growled a lusty stevedore.

"Ain't much room for racing on this track," Mike took the advice and struck for the middle of the street, though wagons here were almost as plentiful as men on the foot-pavement.

At this speed he quickly overhauled the boat, bringing it directly under his eye by the time it had reached Vine street wharf.

He now moved more slowly, close to the line of the houses, keeping a keen look-out upon the object of his pursuit.

The two rowers pulled steadily on, utterly unaware that they were under surveillance of so keen a pair of eyes as those which twinkled under Mike's brows.

Reaching one of the up-town wharves, they pulled inward, and drew close up, mooring the boat to the wharf-logs. The boy stood at a distance, closely observing their operations, but keeping himself well out of sight.

But their movements seemed brief and decided, for in a very few minutes they left the boat and proceeded up the wharf. Mike held back, and was very intently engaged in another direction, as they passed close by him.

"Guess I'd best foller them lads," he muttered, after giving them time to get a little in advance.

But our young friend soon found that following them was not so easy as he had anticipated. He turned the corner of the street to discover that they were quite out of sight. Fancying that they had turned into Water street, he hastened upward, and gazed down this narrow avenue. But in vain, the men were no longer visible.

"I'll be shot if they haven't flung me ag'in!" growled Mike. "They've shot into some den 'bout these diggings; for there ain't no trap-doors in the street hereways. Howsomever, it's somethin' to know where the boat is. There's some game in this move, sure, and I'm a-goin' to watch that boat like a cat watches mackerel."

CHAPTER XV. A BROKEN MATCH.

BUT Mike had other duties to perform besides that of watching the boat of the pretended fishermen. For the correspondence between Levi Rostrou and Mrs. Northcote had been continued, during the few days past, and so anxious was he to have the marriage ceremony performed that he insisted on its being completed immediately.

"He has important interests calling him to the South," said Kate, with a meaning laugh. "And he cannot bring himself to the point of leaving Philadelphia until he has married mamma."

"But what has she got to say 'bout it?" asked Mike. "You know there's two sides to everything, even to a cat's tail; and I s'pose there must be to a courting."

"Oh! she is willing. She is fully satisfied now what a villain he is, and anxious to have him punished as he deserves."

"But don't he make no excuse for his ridiculous queer way of doin'?" Courtin' a widdier by letter isn't right up to Gunter."

"I hardly think I would like to be courted that way," replied Kate laughing. "But when a gentleman slips and sprains his ankle, so that he is not able to walk, what is to be done?"

"Oh! he's sprained his ankle, has he? Let him look out sharp he don't sprain his neck afore he's through with it. That's a mighty good dodge. But I was sent up here, Katey, by Cap Claxton, to find out what's the last news on the bulletin-board. Things was comin' to a p'int at the last report; and he wants to know if they've got to the p'int yet."

"There is important news," said Kate gravely. "He wants the marriage to come off to-night, as he ought to go South to-morrow. He will send a carriage for mamma and me, since he is not able to come himself."

"Well, if that ain't rich papers!" cried Mike

throwing up his hat in ecstasy. "Why, does he take your mother to be an out-and-out ninny? He must think she wants him and his money as bad as git out."

"It certainly looks that way."

"But what did she say?"

"She agrees."

"That's square up to the notch," exclaimed Mike. "He's playin' a keen game to fling us from the track, and not let anybody know where it's to come off. But if he does then you kin sell me out cheap. I'll bet a hoss ag'in a pertaber-bug that we circumvent him. I've jist got his whole game down fine."

"I must go now," rejoined Kate. "We might be seen together."

"See here," said Mike, "jist post her not to let the bizness be rushed through. She'd best be very delicate, and faint two or three times; or else have to brush her hair and put on a clean collar. Or some of them cute ways that women have to kill time, and make the men mad. We got to have an hour good to git things in shape."

"Don't fear but that we are up to all those little tricks," replied Kate, with her merry laugh. "She would be a very poor specimen of a woman who could not spend an hour over the tying of a shoe-string."

A few more words, and the two friends separated, Kate going toward her home, with a fear in her heart that the scheme might fail, and she and her mother be put in a very unpleasant situation.

But no such misgivings troubled Mike's young heart. He leaped with joy as he hurried along the streets, eager to report progress to Captain Claxton and Harry Bland.

The long summer evening slowly drew on. The sun set, and the slow twilight spread its rosy gleam upon the western sky. Darkness was gradually settling down, though it was partly dispelled by the faint light of a young moon.

A carriage drew up at the door of a small house in which dwelt Mrs. Northcote and her daughter Kate. A few minutes passed, and then the two ladies came out from the humble habitation attired for the street.

Kate looked anxiously around. There was no one in sight. Yes; yonder was a boy, lolling indolently on a neighboring door-step, apparently concerned in nothing nearer than the stars.

Yet, heedless as he seemed, a peculiar movement of his hand satisfied the young girl that he was more aware than he appeared to be of what was going on. With less anxiety than before she followed her mother into the carriage.

It rolled off, its pair of sturdy horses drawing it rapidly down the narrow street, and into the wider avenues adjoining.

And the boy on the door-step? He had disappeared. No life remained in the street but a melancholy dog, dolefully baying at the distant moon.

Through street after street the carriage rolled on. For almost an hour its progress continued. Finally it drew up in front of a house in the north-western section of the city. The coachman sprang from his perch, and hastened to open the door of the vehicle. The door of the house opened at the same time, and a gentleman appeared, who assisted the ladies from the carriage.

"Where are we?" asked Mrs. Northcote, in a faint, frightened voice.

"This is the house of the Rev. Mr. Norton, ladies," spoke the gentleman, in a reassuring tone. "Please walk in. Mr. Rostrou is awaiting you."

Kate, only less frightened and trembling than her mother, stood looking anxiously around her. But the street seemed deserted.—No; not quite deserted. There was surely a boy lolling on yonder door-step, with his eyes turned upward to the moon.

A smile of relief, hidden under the folds of her veil, came upon Kate's face as she perceived this form. But for their change of locality one could have sworn that it was the same boy, in the same attitude, whom she had seen in a distant street, an hour before.

The door closed upon the entering ladies. The coachman mounted again to the perch of his carriage, and sat there in a listless, waiting attitude. The boy again disappeared.

Kate was not mistaken. It was the same boy. He had reached that spot as a rear-passenger of the carriage. He was now leaving that locality as rapidly as a pair of very active heels could carry him.

"I hope them women 'll play the dodge game long enough fur us to git our little trap set," is the thought that runs through his mind. "The bait's all right, but it ain't much good 'bout the trap."

Meanwhile the veiled ladies had entered the residence of the Rev. Mr. Norton. They were conducted at once to the parlor, where a neatly attired gentleman rose to greet them. He came forward with a painfully hesitating movement.

"Please keep seated, Mr. Rostrou," said the clergyman, a benevolent looking individual. "It must be dreadfully painful to you with your sprained ankle."

"It is, indeed," he replied, sinking again into his chair.

He held out his hand to Mrs. Northcote, who had approached him.

"This is the lady, Mr. Norton," he announced. "I presume we may go on at once."

Mrs. Northcote held back, not seeming to see the extended hand.

"I am happy to greet you on this occasion, madame," the clergyman politely remarked. "I will call witnesses, sir, we need have no delay."

"Will you pray excuse me?" asked Mrs. Northcote, in a faint, quivering voice. "I feel so overcome. For a few moments only, please."

"Cannot my mamma be shown to a private room for a little while?" asked Kate. "I fear she will faint with emotion unless she has a few minutes' rest."

"Oh! there can be no need of that!" cried the would-be bridegroom, rising and stepping hastily forward, apparently forgetting his lame foot. "Be firm, my dear Emily! Do not yield to this weakness. Let me sustain you."

He grasped her reluctant hand.

"But your ankle, Mr. Rostrou?" spoke Kate, with much display of feeling.

A sudden change came upon his face at these words; a look of deep pain. He sunk again into his chair.

"I forgot it in the excitement of my feelings," he answered. "I hope I have not injured it."

"That would be too bad," rejoined Kate. "But mamma must really have some time. There are some changes of dress that—"

"But that is of no importance at all!" cried Rostrou, hurriedly. "I am well satisfied, indeed, with the dress she has on."

"It may be of no importance to you," answered Kate with offended dignity. "But it is important to us. I imagine our wishes have some right to be consulted."

"Certainly. Of course," rejoined Levi, with an effort to restrain himself. "But—"

"I am in Kate's hands," said Mrs. Northcote, in the same feeble voice as before.

"Why certainly, ladies," exclaimed the clergyman. "Come with me, please. Of course your scruples are only natural. Mr. Rostrou must learn to wait on the ladies."

With a facetious smile the benevolent gentleman led them from the room, leaving Rostrou in a state of excited impatience.

"Hang it all!" he ejaculated. "A fellow might as well be tied to a nail as have anything to do with a nervous woman. I've got to stand it, though, I suppose. It will be my turn soon."

But in the second story front room to which the ladies had been conducted there was no application of smelling salts, or any evident change of dress going on.

Not that Mrs. Northcote did not show signs of agitation approaching to faintness.

"Oh, if I had not undertaken this, Kate! I fear I can never go through with it. And suppose they should not come! What would we ever do?"

"But you can say no, instead of yes," suggested Kate. "They cannot force you into a marriage."

"Yet think how unpleasant a duty it is. Oh, if I was only safely out of this!"

"Keep up your spirits, mamma," rejoined Kate. "I will represent what you please. I will have you in a dead faint, and send for a doctor if you wish."

"Look out the window, Kate. See if any one is in sight."

Meanwhile, down-stairs, the impatience of the waiting bridegroom grew greater and greater. He fumed and fretted, as a half-hour passed without a reappearance of the ladies.

"Was there ever the like of it?" he exclaimed.

"What in the world can be keeping them? I will go—"

"But your ankle, my dear sir," cried the clergyman warningly, as Levi started up.

The invalid sunk again into his chair, with a groan which sounded suspiciously like a suppressed oath.

The minutes passed on.

Mr. Norton, at the earnest request of Mr. Rostrou, knocked at the door of the room containing the ladies.

"Mr. Rostrou is growing very anxious," he announced.

"Please give us five minutes more," pleaded Kate. "My mamma is recovering from her faintness, but she is hardly fit for the ceremony yet. Only five minutes, sir."

"Very well," he replied.

"Only five minutes, Kate?" her mother anxiously asked.

"Trust me, mamma, I will stretch five minutes in to an hour, if necessary."

"But do look from the window again. Why do they not come?"

"I am like the anxious sister in Bluebeard," returned Kate, laughingly.

"Ah, mamma!" she cried from the open window, "some one has entered the street! One, two, three men. They are coming this way! It is they! They make the signal!"

"Thank Heaven!" exclaimed Mrs. Northcote fervently. "Let us go down."

A very few minutes afterward the wedding party was grouped before the Rev. Mr. Norton, and he had opened the services.

Word after word of the marriage ceremony fell from his lips. Mrs. Northcote's anxiety returned as it approached its consummation.

Only Kate heard the front door quietly open and close. Only Kate heard subdued steps in the hall.

"If any one knows reason why this man and this woman should not be united in the holy bonds of matrimony, let him now speak or forever hold his peace," fell in solemn accents from the lips of the clergyman.

A most startling answer came. The door of the room flew open, revealing the forms of three stalwart men, while behind them stood a sturdy boy.

"I know abundant cause," cried the foremost. "First that the woman is my wife and I don't intend to give her up to this bound.—Second that Levi Rostrou is a thief, a pirate, and a murderer, and there are some gentlemen here that want him bad."

The two remaining men advanced in the room, toward the startled bridegroom, who had heretofore remained in his chair, as unfit to stand.

But now a remarkable change came upon him. His weak ankle healed with astounding suddenness, as he leaped to his feet and sprung forward, with a bitter curse.

The foremost man attempted to seize him, but went down like a log under a fierce blow from the villain's fist.

The next instant he had turned, and, with a quick movement, had leaped through an open window in the rear of the parlor.

The man started to pursue him.

"Talk to me!" cried Mike, warningly. "You might as well chase a weasel. There's the cab at the door, and I know just where he's bound. We must go for the boys and strike hot and heavy."

"One moment," said Captain Claxton, as the men returned. "How long will it take to get through a wedding, at the shortest meter?"

"Say five minutes," replied the astonished clergyman.

"Then I want you to splice me and this woman together. We have been joined once, but I calculate another knot won't hurt, after a divorce."

Mrs. Northcote sprung up, her face irradiated with joy, while Kate threw her arms warmly about her father, and kissed his weather-beaten face.

It did not take long to convince the astounded clergyman that they were in good earnest in this request, and in a very short time Captain Claxton and his divorced wife were reunited in the holy bonds of matrimony.

"Now you must excuse me, Emily," he cried, with a sounding kiss on her pouting lips, "I've got other business on hand. Levi Rostrou's got to be nabbed."

In a minute more the cab was rapidly rolling away.

CHAPTER XVI.

LAST SCENE OF ALL.

The boat of the harbor police lay moored at Vine street wharf, its half-dozen oarsmen in their seats, waiting idly, as if for some project in contemplation.

"Well, this is lazy work," said one of them, impatiently. "If there's to be any fun in the wind I wish they'd soon show themselves."

His appeal was almost immediately answered by the quick roll of a carriage along the river avenue. It turned on the wharf, and halted, several men springing from its interior.

"The game's afoot, boys!" cried out one of these. "He gave us the slip. We must try to cut him off on the river."

"Are you sure he is taking to the stream?"

"Mike here says so," was the reply, as the three men and the boy hastily descended to the boat. "We will have to try the chance of it. Give way!"

The boat shot out from the wharf and turned upstream, the men pulling with a long, steady stroke, which sent their craft rapidly through the water.

"Are you sure of the spot, Mike?"

"Sure of it," rejoined Mike. "I s'pose you'll be asking me next if I'm sure these are my finger-nails. But, anyhow, that ain't no sort of 'count. If the fox made for 'em they're on the river by this time, and it's got to be a chase and a fight."

The moon was now rapidly descending to the west; but its beams yet shone over the tops of the river-wall of houses, and struck the water near the center of the channel.

The police boat was moving along in the shadow of the wharves, scarcely discernible from a distance.

"Hist!" warned Harry Bland. "Is not that the roll of oars?"

"Yes," returned Captain Claxton, who was looking outwardly. "And there she lifts.—See! Her nose has just struck the line of moonlight."

"What say you, Mike? You ought to know their boat."

"That's them," was the boy's brief but confident answer.

"Then lay to your oars, lads, with a will!" exclaimed Harry, as he swept the boat's head outward, toward the chase.

The long, strong, steady strokes sent the heavy but sharply-built boat shooting like an arrow through the seething waters. The fugitives seemed not yet aware of this pursuit and rowed on leisurely. But they suddenly aroused themselves as the police boat shot into the moonlight. They bent to their oars with a will, and quickly darted ahead, their boat's prow turned toward the distant wharf line of Camden.

The chase soon became exciting. Though the police boat was much heavier than the other, yet eight oars told against four, and it was soon evident that the distance between the two craft was diminishing.

"Lay to it, boys! Lay to it, my hearties!" encouraged Harry Bland, as he steered for the chase. "We are going two feet to their one. Lay to it like beavers!"

Mike was the only unoccupied person in the boat. He had coiled himself up in the bow, cramping a boat hook in his hands, while his eyes were intently fixed on the flying boat.

"We are lapping her, hand over hand!" he cried. "Them chaps must be skeered. I never saw 'em row wus. Let out! Let out, cronies!"

Minute after minute passed. The distance slowly decreased. The fugitive was heading in an inclined course for the shore line of Camden. But they now turned and struck directly for the shore.

Harry quickly followed, heading to cut them off from this refuge.

Still the distance slowly lessened. Not twenty feet now separated them.

"Drop your oars!" he shouted. "Surrender! or it will be worse for you!"

A cry of defiance was the only answer from the fleeing boat.

"Give her a spurt," said Mike, in a low tone. "Limber up your elbows, and let her slide!"

The men obeyed, redoubling their exertions. The boat shot forward with greater rapidity than before.

Suddenly Mike, who had been critically measuring the distance between the two boats, sprung to his feet, the long boat-hook in his hand.

Bending forward, he flung out the hook end, clinging vigorously to the other extremity.

A slight shock ran through the two boats.

"I've got them!" screamed Mike, hauling back strongly upon the hook. "I've nabbed them! Give us a hand here, Cap!"

The dexterously-thrown hook had caught the stern of the fleeing craft. In a moment more strong hands were pulling her back within reach of her pursuer.

The oars were at rest. Every man in both boats was on his feet. A momentary confusion ensued, broken by oaths and cries of triumph.

Then the sweep of oar-blades opened the fight between the contending crews.

Mike's position, upright in the bow of his boat, made him an easy mark for the clubbed oars. Unheeded by all he went headlong overboard under the force of a sweeping blow.

The river resounded with cries, groans, the rattle of meeting oars, the grinding of the two boats, which lay side by side.

But the pursuers were much too numerous. In a very few minutes the fugitives were overcome, being drawn vigorously into the larger boat and handcuffed, one by one.

"But where is Levi Rostrou?" the captain suddenly cried. "He was there a minute ago. Where is he?"

In vain they looked around. There was no sign of the leader of the thieves.

"And Mike, too, is gone!" exclaimed Harry. "The boy is gone!"

"Don't you worry 'bout the boy," cried a youthful voice from a distance. "This way, lads, quick as lightning! I'm on the trail of the fox. Here he swims! Let out, or he'll strike shore ahead of you!"

In a minute Captain Claxton, Harry Bland, and two others had flung themselves into the boat of the river pirates, and were rowing swiftly in the direction of the voice.

"That's the provender, my hearties!" yelled Mike. "He's here, just ahead!"

With a violent oath the fugitive turned suddenly on Mike, who was following him with the pertinacity of a terrier after a mastiff.

He struck a furious blow at the shaggy head, which rose from the water just in his rear.

But Mike was too old a water-dog to be caught napping. In an instant he disappeared below the surface, and the blow was ineffectually expended upon the eddying waters.

The next moment the strong grasp of the pursuers was upon the baffled fugitive. Captain Claxton's vigorous gripe closed upon him like a vise, and despite his struggles he was dragged over the thwart of the boat, and lay helpless in her bottom.

"It's my turn now, Levi Rostrou," cried the captain. "You've had your day, but you've got to the end of your rope."

"No he ain't," screamed Mike, as he popped up from the water, and scrambled into the boat, almost upsetting it in his effort. "He won't get to the end of his rope till he gits it round his neck, and t'other end tied to a tree. For there's little Joe Tod-a-wait-in' for him."

And here we may as well briefly close our story. Poor little Joe Tod, whom nobody knew, was not avenged by the hangman. The only evidence of his murder lay in the oath of Tony Drake, one of the parties concerned, and even he did not render it certain that murder had been intended.

But that he had been in the employ of the gang of river-thieves was certain. And it was equally certain that he had disappeared. There was evidence of manslaughter, if not of premeditated murder.

And as for the other charge against the gang, that of robbing from various vessels, the testimony was so direct and strong, that no time was needed in coming to a verdict.

The trial ended in committal of the gang for various terms of imprisonment, Levi Rostrou and Jake, as being principally concerned in the death of the boy, receiving sentences of fifteen years each in the penitentiary. The others received milder sentences, as being convicted only of robbery.

As for our other friends we no longer find Mrs. Northcote and her daughter dragging out a half-starved existence in their little down-town residence.

They may be found now, as Mrs. Claxton and Miss Kate Claxton, dwelling in an elegant residence in one of the main streets of the city, and enjoying all those comforts of existence of which they had been so long deprived.

The somewhat querulous look which long privation had brought on the elderly lady's round face, is utterly gone, and she is as rosy and beaming as the full moon.

And as for Kate, her tall form and beautiful face, now set off by tasteful and elegant attire, mark her as one of the belles of the Quaker city; while her gentle, merry, and charming manners are even more attractive than her appearance.

And there is no happier soul in the world than Captain Claxton. In his new home, with his loving wife and charming daughter, he cannot help calling him-

self an unbounded dupe to have let himself be so long robbed of all this happiness. The only thing he deprecates is the frequent breaks in his domestic life caused by the necessity of his voyages.

"But I could not live without breathing the sea air," he says. "And if it is sad to part, the sweetness is only doubled at every return. So I think I shall have to stick to the water."

"Now don't you worry, Cap Claxton," answers Mike Merry, one of the most frequent visitors of the rejoined family. "I'll take keer of the ladies while you're gone. And if any other chap of the size and shape of Levi the fox comes howlin' round here, see if I don't go fur him like an Irish emigrant for a pot of b'iled taters! I'm a-goin' to be sure death on all sich critters—that's me, Mike Merry!"

Mike is still a friend of the harbor police, spending as much time aboard their boat as on shore. And he has given a half promise to go to sea with Cap Claxton on his next voyage—though he is not quite satisfied in his mind if it will be the right thing to leave the ladies alone to fight their battles with the wicked world.

And so we leave them, in that world which is all a battle.

THE END.

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